

CORRUPTED BLOOD LORD

Chapter 41 - 40 - The Weight of Ink

Teclos exhaled slowly and lifted the thick parchment in front of him. The quill felt strange in his hand—feathered, with a sharp tip—and the ink beside him glimmered faintly, something that wouldn't be erased once he put it on the parchment.

For a moment, he simply stared at it, heart thumping loudly. Today was the day he had been preparing for ever since he first learned about this ceremony.

He dipped the quill carefully and turned the first page.

The test began with questions about monsters—creatures that lurked beyond Kolma, waiting in the shadows or simply existing as part of the world's dangerous tapestry.

The exam divided them into two categories: beasts and monsters. Beasts were more like animals from his old world, but with powers—usually docile or harmless if left unprovoked. Monsters, on the other hand, were dangerous, often aggressive, and sometimes terrifyingly intelligent.

The first few questions were straightforward. A water buffalo with the ability to manipulate water, a griffin, a Pegasus, a unicorn, a firebear—he had to list their temperaments, noting which could be approached safely and which demanded caution.

There were some trick questions mixed in as well, such as a seemingly innocent and even cute-looking forest deer with soft brown fur and wide, trusting yellow eyes. The Viper Stag, it was called. It had venomous fangs. Highly aggressive when cornered. Its venom capable of melting skin and paralyzing its victim within minutes.

Looking over at Ralph and Gillard, Teclos suppressed a grin. He saw Ralph lightly tapping the table in frustration, while Gillard muttered under his breath, trying to make sense of it all.

The next section demanded he list the truly dangerous creatures: Dragons, Manticores, Gargoyles, Phoenixes. For each, he noted intelligence, behavior, and known weaknesses. The Basilisk was last—a creature whose gaze could petrify and instantly kill you. Teclos wrote: be cautious and do not approach. Observe from a safe distance. Requires multiple hunters or specific magic to neutralize.

Satisfied, he glanced at his neighbors again. Surprisingly, Ralph's pen moved confidently, and unsurprisingly, Gillard gripped his quill tightly, his hand remained still without writing anything. A faint laugh rose in Teclos' chest, but he forced it down and turned the page.

The next section was numbers. Math and money. Alvar's currency had four denominations: copper, silver, gold, and platinum, each rising by a factor of one

hundred. A simple system in theory: one hundred copper made a silver, one hundred silver made a gold, and one hundred gold made a platinum. Trading, though, introduced the challenge—converting coins, calculating profit, and adjusting for seasonal scarcity.

Teclos worked through the problems quickly.

Each problem required careful calculation and attention to the exchange system, but his mind flowed easily—this was middle-school math for him.

Again, he glanced around. Ralph continued at a steady pace, occasionally pausing to think, while Gillard clutched his head, jaw tight in despair. The tension radiating from Gillard made Teclos shake his head.

There was no doubt in his mind that Gillard hadn't studied at all and just worked at the forge instead.

He dipped the quill again and moved to the next page.

Herbal knowledge came next, and Teclos felt a spark of excitement. Healing plants, mana-replenishing herbs, medicines—he knew everything. Mint and chamomile for minor ailments, heartleaf to stabilize mana, sunbloom to boost stamina, nightroot for fatigue. Each herb had multiple uses, and a few were deadly if combined incorrectly. He wrote down the properties carefully, imagining the fields just outside Kolma, the scent of sunbloom and the rustle of leaves.

Looking up, he caught sight of Gillard yet again, and he was slumped in despair. Ralph also seemed to scratch his head over something. Teclos frowned slightly. He was starting to get worried for Gillard—but he forced himself to focus back on his parchment.

The next section was his weakest: nobility and etiquette. He took a deep breath. Names, ranks, proper behavior in front of nobles—every detail mattered.

The exam expected knowledge of the royal family: King Roderic Draevenfall—his age, official title, appearance, and demeanor. Nearly the entire royal family had blonde hair and red eyes, and the king possessed a Light mana affinity.

Then Queen Lysandra Draevenfall—similar details, except she had piercing blue eyes instead and a Water mana affinity.

He even had to name his children and what was known about them.

Like Princess Talia, that she was twelve, and had wind affinity.

Prince Darion, eleven, Lightning affinity.

And lastly, Princess Seraphine, who had an Earth affinity.

Why he had to know all this was beyond him, but nonetheless, he continued.

Then came the nobles he might actually meet, since they were closest to their town.

Starting with Count Aweq Van Denos—nearing his thirties, slick black hair neatly combed back, striking blue eyes. He was known as the benevolent ruler of Teclos' county and had a wife and daughter.

Then the southern noble bordering their county: Count Bellagar. Still in his early twenties, long red hair, deep brown eyes. Known as somewhat of a womanizer, with three wives and a young son.

With that tedious task of describing people irrelevant to his daily life finished, he moved on.

The instructions about decorum and etiquette toward nobles emphasized proper conduct: bowing from the waist, speaking only when addressed to, recognizing insignia and rank, maintaining a respectful tone.

Teclos' hand shook slightly as he wrote. It was a lot to remember, and he was sure he forgot some things.

Feeling nervous, he glanced at his neighbors again. Ralph wrote confidently and quickly. Maybe sticking close to him would not be a bad idea if they ever encountered a noble.

Gillard, meanwhile, leaned forward and banged his forehead lightly against the desk. Teclos tried not to laugh. Clearly, he was a hopeless case.

Finally, the exam moved to kingdom knowledge: maps, borders, allies, and enemies.

Teclos' eyes lit up. Alvar, their homeland, sat at the center of the continent—a strategically disadvantageous location.

To the north lay the Orc Kingdom of Gorlok, warring openly with Alvar.

To the west was the Human Kingdom of Tessania, bound by a treaty of alliance.

To the east, the Elven Kingdom of Ellyria maintained a non-aggression pact.

To the south sprawled the Lizardmen Empire of Lustrion, a neutral nation but there were talks of war.

Between Lustrion and Alvar rose the Dragon Peaks, a mountain range stretching for hundreds of kilometers—dwarven territory. Neutral, but formidable.

Religion was part of the test: the Order of Dawn preached peace and guidance but enforced obedience harshly. Its contradictions were clear—mercy for the devout, punishment for the defiant. Temples and clergy were woven into governance, influencing trade, law, and social order.

Teclos traced the borders in his mind while filling in answers: key cities, important rivers, mountain passes, trade routes.

His mind wandered for a second and imagined the Radiant King Roderic issuing decrees from the capital, Queen Lysandra managing affairs with quiet authority.

Count Aweq with a smug smile and wine in his hands, reigning over his county, a steady and benevolent presence for the villages all around, while Count Bellagar's family navigated the political complexities of the southern lands.

A fleeting thought crossed his mind—it might not have been so bad to be born a noble.

Every line he wrote pulled him deeper into the world beyond Kolma. The quill scratched rhythmically against the parchment, and Teclos smiled faintly, planning to see everything for himself someday.

By the time he set down the quill, his wrist ached and his brow was damp with sweat. He felt mentally drained.

He had cataloged monsters and beasts, solved all the math and trading questions, worked through currency problems, recorded the properties of essential herbs, carefully noted noble etiquette, and mapped the kingdom with its precarious borders. The test was painfully long, yet exhilarating at the same time.

There were not only written questions but also hand-drawn illustrations of beasts, herbs, currency, nobles—and even a map. He had even managed to learn something during the test itself.

This world was full of opportunity—beautiful, yet dangerous.

He leaned back and allowed himself a moment to look around the hall. Sunlight poured through the high windows, illuminating polished wood and drifting dust motes. Elders sat silently along the walls, observing, while the young students bent over their pages, pens and quills scratching, minds working.

Ralph wrote with a calm, focused expression, his quill barely ever stopped.

Gillard, on the other hand, looked like he was fighting for his life—muttering and groaning, scratching his head in despair.

Teclos shook his head, he was a tad bit worried for him.

'Seems like he'll need some cheering up after today,' he thought.

The exam had already done what it was intended to do. It had measured knowledge, focus, and patience. But more than that, it had shown him a glimpse of the world outside Kolma—the allies, the enemies, the dangers, and the protections, all woven together like threads in a tapestry.

He felt the weight of his coming-of-age ceremony as more than tradition. It was preparation—a map for survival, a guide for his mind learning how to live in a complicated, beautiful, and dangerous world.

The first trial, the written portion, was complete. Teclos exhaled, letting the quill rest between his fingers before placing it carefully beside the inkpot. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, steadying his breathing.

There was still nearly half an hour remaining.

Around him, parchment still rustled and quills scratched in uneven rhythms—some frantic, others slow and lost.

Teclos glanced down at his completed pages and pulled the stack closer again. If this knowledge was meant to prepare them for adulthood, then he would not waste a single breath of it.

He began re-reading.

The distinctions between beast and monster. The conversion of copper to silver, silver to gold. The rigid etiquette required before nobility. The borders of Alvar.

He traced each answer with his eyes, committing them into memory. Someday, in some unforeseen moment, a single forgotten detail might mean the difference between life and death.

The remaining time slipped by quietly.

Then the scratching stopped.

"Hands off the tables. Quills down."

Elira's voice cut cleanly through the hall. Commanding and final.

Teclos blinked and lifted his gaze. Elira had stepped forward from the wall, hands folded neatly before her. The elders rose from their seats at the corners.

"Remain seated," she instructed. "The elders will collect your papers."

Chairs creaked softly as nervous tension shifted through the room. One by one, parchments were gathered, stacked, and carried to the long table at the front. Teclos watched his own pages disappear into the pile.

When the last parchment was collected, Elira looked over the hall of sixty youths, with an unreadable expression.

"You may leave now."

That was all.

Benches scraped loudly against the floor, whispers erupted, and the heavy doors of the guild hall swung open as sunlight poured inside. Teclos caught a final glimpse of the elders taking their seats around the table, already unrolling the first sheets and preparing to grade them.

Then he stepped outside.

The festival air hit him at once—music, laughter, the smell of roasted meat and fresh bread. Villagers milled about in high spirits.

A burst of laughter caught his attention.

Ralph was doubled over, clutching his stomach, while Gillard stood stiff as a post, face flushed crimson.

Curious, Teclos approached them.

Ralph wheezed the moment he saw him. "Get this—" he gasped between laughs, "—he mixed up a cockatrice and a gorgon!"

He bent over again, shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

Teclos couldn't help it. A chuckle escaped him.

Gillard's ears turned even redder. "Alright, alright already!" he snapped, throwing his hands up. "It happens to the best of us, okay?! They both have wings, scales, and can fly—close enough!"

Teclos, still amused, replied without thinking. "Man... hunters have to know this stuff. Hopefully the elders overlook it. Otherwise, it could affect your path selection."

Suddenly there was only silence.

Ralph stopped laughing.

Gillard's expression shifted instantly from embarrassment into worry.

"You think...?" he muttered.

Teclos blinked, only now realizing what he had implied. Before he could recover, his gaze drifted across the festival grounds—and he spotted his father seated at a long wooden table, tankard of ale in hand, speaking animatedly with Kosak.

Opportunity.

He clapped both friends lightly on the shoulders. "Relax. I'm sure it'll be fine. I'll be back."

Gillard didn't look entirely convinced.

"Meet by the tavern in an hour?" Teclos added.

Ralph nodded, seeing where Teclos was headed. "Yeah. Go see if you can squeeze some coins out of your old man."

Teclos grinned and headed toward the table, already considering how best to ask for a few extra coppers. Perhaps something sweet from the stalls. Or maybe—if luck favored him—something better.

Behind him, the festival carried on in full swing, laughter rising into the evening sky as the day quietly drew toward the end.

Chapter 42 - 41 - Ceremony Day 2

Morning arrived, and Teclos was on his feet again.

Yesterday's festival lanterns had long since burned out, and only a few scraps of colored ribbon still clung to fence posts and stall frames. Dew settled over the rooftops of Kolma's town quarter, and everything was still and peaceful.

Inside Teclos' home, the scent of warm bread and honeyed porridge filled the air.

His mother stood by the hearth, sleeves rolled neatly to her elbows, stirring a pot with steady hands. His father sat already dressed, though less lively than usual, rubbing his temples and regretting one cup too many from the night before.

Teclos entered dressed more comfortably, in clothes that would allow him to exercise freely. He had chosen a clean linen shirt—the one without mended tears at the sleeves—and fastened his leather tunic properly with a belt. His leather boots were strapped tightly, and he wore grey wool pants.

His mother noticed him coming in.

"You're up early," she said with a knowing smile.

"I couldn't sleep much," Teclos admitted, taking his seat.

His father gave a short grunt.

"Me too, son... me too."

They ate in relative silence at first, but it did not last long.

"Don't worry too much, you'll do great," she said, setting bread onto his plate.

"I know," Teclos replied. "I just wonder what they have planned for the tests."

Talmir snorted lightly, still clutching his temples. "It'll likely be strength, endurance... maybe flexibility."

Teclos frowned, remembering Gillard's sad face from the day before. He got careless with his words, and the silence that followed after them was worrisome.

"I hope Gillard will be fine today. I might have said something bad yesterday," he muttered.

His mother's eyes softened. "Whatever you said, I'm sure it wasn't that bad, and Gillard is a strong boy, so don't worry too much."

He nodded, but only half convinced.

When they stepped outside, they saw the strange, silent yet somehow lively crowd that lingers after a festival—some had stayed up so long they were only just now making their way home.

Ralph and Gillard were already waiting near the well in the town square, with their families.

The difference between Gillard yesterday and today was impossible to miss.

Ralph stood unusually close to Gillard, clapping him on the back with exaggerated encouragement.

"Don't worry, man, you look fine," Ralph insisted. "A little pale, sure—but that's just your natural... charm."

Gillard did, in fact, look dreadful.

His skin was pale as a ghost's, his eyes had dark rings around them. He looked as if he didn't sleep at all last night.

"You don't understand, man," Gillard muttered. "What if they think I'm not fit to be a hunter? What if they close that path for me?"

Ralph rolled his eyes. "You are the strongest among us physically, no one rivals you in that aspect."

"How does being strong even matter here?! What if they want a smarter hunter?"

Teclos approached, feeling a sting of guilt twist in his chest.

"Listen," he began, forcing a grin, "cheer up already, strength always matters for a hunter."

Gillard barely looked at him.

"Hunters don't only need to know things," Teclos continued. "They need strength. Stamina. Courage. You've got all three, and I'm sure the hunter path isn't closed for you."

Gillard's expression softened slightly.

"And even if the elders suggest something else," Teclos added with a shrug, "you can ignore them. Be a hunter with us anyway."

Ralph nodded vigorously. "Exactly! We'll hunt something ridiculous just to prove a point."

A faint breath escaped Gillard—almost a laugh.

"Alright, I'll try to calm down, you can stop with the pity."

Teclos and Ralph both felt relieved at once, the strain in their shoulders loosening as Gillard's expression softened.

Their parents stood a few paces back, watching the exchange. Teclos caught them watching, and his parents gave him a thumbs up. Gillard's mother had pressed a hand to her chest in visible relief.

The town square filled steadily once more.

But the mood had changed.

The loud revelry of yesterday had been replaced with yawns, subdued murmurs, and more than a few villagers were rubbing their temples and faces. The aftermath of alcohol lingered in the air.

On the raised wooden platform stood Brahm.

He looked even worse than those villagers.

His posture was crooked. His usually booming presence seemed almost nonexistent now. Even from a distance, Teclos could see that he had a rough night.

When he cleared his throat, it lacked its usual thunder.

"People of Kolma," Brahm began, his voice slightly shaky, though he continued steadily, "we gather once more for the continuation of the trials."

A villager near the fountain called out, barely containing a grin, "Can't hold your liquor, huh, Chief?"

A ripple of laughter passed through the crowd.

Brahm's eye twitched.

He glared in the direction of that voice but wisely chose not to escalate it. A few villagers who were clearly in a similar condition chuckled in solidarity.

His speech was shorter this time.

"The written trial has concluded," he said. "Results will not be posted publicly."

A murmur spread through the youths.

"They will be delivered individually on the final day," Brahm continued, raising a hand to quiet them, "during your counseling sessions with the elders. Until then, you are to focus on the trials themselves—not the outcome."

Someone near the front asked, "Why can't we see the results now?"

Brahm inhaled slowly.

"So that some of you won't get embarrassed," he said, "I imagine that more than a few parents will be angry at their sons and daughters."

That statement silenced any more questions about the tests, with everyone hoping that this wasn't them.

"All youths, follow me. The rest can enjoy themselves in the festival again," he said.

The crowd shifted as villagers and youths alike began moving. One group separated toward the training grounds beyond the town square, near the apple orchards, and the other drifted back toward the taverns and stalls.

The arena sat just past the trees—a circular dirt field enclosed by wooden fencing. Weapon racks lined one side. Training dummies stood new and unused. Targets were fixed along the far end.

Peculiarly, there were a lot of stones and strange contraptions scattered about as well.

The morning sun filtered through the apple branches, casting patterned shadows over the ground.

Teclos felt that he was ready to stomp his competition.

Beside him, Gillard rolled his shoulders, focused on the task at hand now.

Ralph cracked his knuckles with a smirk on his face.

Ahead, the elders had already taken seats beneath the shade of an apple tree. Elira sat beside them, a parchment in hand.

Brahm moved to the center of the field, rubbing his temples one last time before straightening his back.

Hungover or not, he still had a duty to fulfill.

"Line up!" he barked—less thunderous than yesterday, but nonetheless commanding.

The second day officially began.

The sixty youths stood in three uneven lines, nervous and excited at the same time.

The trees swayed gently beyond the fence, their branches whispering in the mild morning breeze. The training grounds were usually loud at this time of the day, but now they were eerily quiet.

Hunters stood at every corner of the arena.

Leaning against posts with folded arms.

They were there to prevent cheating, although no one would dare attempt that under so many watchful eyes. At the same time, they would assess the youths—guts, perseverance, strength, and the quiet refusal to give up.

Brahm stepped forward again.

"You will be divided into three groups of twenty," he announced. "Each group will rotate through separate drills. One hour per station."

He began calling names.

Teclos felt his chest tighten briefly until—

"Gillard."

A while later, he stopped listing names and simply said, "That's all for the first group. Now on to the second."

Ralph and Teclos exchanged a glance.

After a while, their names came up in the third group.

Gillard turned slightly, meeting their eyes.

Ralph cupped his hands around Gillard's shoulders. "Show them what you can do, man!"

A few nearby youths snorted.

Teclos raised a fist. "Stomp them into the ground!"

"Quiet! Or you'll be disqualified!" shouted Brahm.

Gillard shook his head, but there was a smile on his face. "I got it." A fiery determination burned in his eyes.

"First group," Brahm commanded, "enter the training grounds."

With a final wave toward his friends, Gillard stepped forward and joined the others moving toward the first station.

Brahm remained with them.

The other two groups waited.

After a brief exchange between the hunters, Sera stepped forward toward Teclos and Ralph's line. Her dark hair was tied high, her movements crisp despite the previous night's festivities.

"Third group with me," she said evenly.

Obin, broad and silent as ever, gestured to the second group. "You're with me."

Once the groups were positioned at their respective stations, Brahm's voice carried across the grounds as he explained the structure.

Each group would begin at a different trial.

The first group—Gillard's—stood before an arrangement of different stones, some of them massive.

The second group gathered near the northern path leading out of town.

The third—Teclos and Ralph's—stood before a row of newly constructed training dummies.

First group's trial seemed to be strength. As Gillard stared at the boulders, he looked at his competition and smiled.

The boulders were arranged by size, smallest to largest. It seemed fairly straightforward. Beyond them stood a waist-high wooden platform.

Brahm walked slowly along the line of youths.

First, he pointed at several round stones in front of them.

"You will lift each boulder onto the platform," he explained, "from the smallest to the largest."

After that, he pointed toward an oddly shaped stone resting on a circular dirt path.

"Here, you will lift this boulder and walk as far as you can with it."

Lastly, he pointed to a rectangular stone.

"Lastly, you will push and topple this chiseled block in a straight line."

The final stone looked truly unforgiving and big.

"This will test your general strength," Brahm continued. "It is about how far you can go before you stop. How determined you are—and, of course, how strong you are."

Beyond the northern gate, Obin stood waiting with the second group.

He did not waste time with theatrics.

"We will run twenty kilometers," he said plainly, with a deep and steady voice. "It won't be easy. You'll have to sustain the pace for a long time—of course, it will be faster than you are comfortable with."

He turned slightly and gestured toward the forest path cutting northward.

"Two hunters will run at the front. Two at the rear. You are to always remain in between them."

The four assigned hunters stepped into position without a word—they had lean figures, clearly built for an endurance run.

"If you forfeit, or if the hunters overtake you," Obin pointed at the rear hunters, "the two at the back will mark the distance you reached. You will then return to town and wait at the gates for the rest to return."

There was no mockery in his tone, but no encouragement either. Just orders and expectations.

"We will cross uneven terrain, narrow ridges, terrain with loose gravel, sections of the forest where visibility drops sharply."

A few of the youths looked uncomfortable and nervous after hearing all of that.

"You may encounter signs of beasts," Obin added calmly. "The more dangerous paths were cleared at dawn, but don't forget that this is still the wild."

Some of them gulped loudly.

"This trial will measure how long you can endure, how well you can control your breath under pressure, and your mental fortitude."

His eyes swept across them, lingering on the overly confident and on those who looked the most anxious.

"When I give the signal, run after the lead hunters," he finished.

He stepped aside.

Near the apple trees, Sera faced the third group with her usual intensity.

"This station tests body control and combat strength," she began. "A flexible body will help you ward off injuries more easily, and combat strength is a must for survival in the wild."

She motioned toward the open space before the training dummies.

"We will start with the flexibility and balance drills."

A few exchanged confused glances.

Sera ignored them.

"You will perform joint rotations, stretching, and balance holds. Some movements will be similar to combat footwork—only we'll do them slower, and more targeted."

She demonstrated and settled into a low stance, her front leg bent sharply while the other extended outward, her torso straight and centered over her hips.

"These exercises strengthen ligaments and increase range of motion. A stiff fighter gets injured or caught easily. Flexibility and balance are both very important for daily life and in fights."

She straightened again.

"These exercises will also warm up your muscles properly. I do not want torn tendons before we begin."

"Are we the only ones who have to do the stretches, ma'am?" a curious girl asked.

"No," Sera replied calmly. "Every group will begin with warm-ups first—except perhaps the runners."

After a brief pause, she gestured toward the newly built dummies—taller than a man, reinforced at the core—as well as the archery targets at the back.

"Once warmed up, each of you will step forward and deliver three strikes on these dummies, and then loose three arrows at the targets."

She held up three fingers.

"Only non-attribute and body-strengthening mana is permitted. This is about your base skills, not elemental affinity."

Her gaze sharpened.

"We will measure your form. Decisiveness. Accuracy. And the raw strength behind your strikes."

She walked to a dummy and placed her palm lightly against its surface.

"You all get three chances," she repeated quietly. "Make them meaningful."

After saying that, the dummy caved in and was blown backward.

Destroyed.

"If you exceed this," she added calmly, "you automatically pass this trial."

She stepped back, folded her arms, and commanded,

"Form five equal lines and stand at least an arm's length away from each other. We will begin with the stretching."

Chapter 43 - 42 - Growth...in Manny Ways

Teclos stood in the second row of the formation, feet shoulder-width apart, arms loose at his sides.

Ralph stood to his right.

Loric to his left.

Ralph, unfortunately, was not focused.

He leaned slightly forward, eyes fixed shamelessly on the girl positioned directly in front of him. She had braided auburn hair and moved with surprising grace as she adjusted her stance. Ralph was not subtle about watching her adjust.

Loric, on the other hand, was very focused.

Just not on the right thing.

His chin was tilted up a fraction too high, eyes flicking between Teclos and the front of the formation as if silently measuring them both. Competitive energy radiated off him—insufferable and annoying.

Teclos rolled his eyes.

Of course.

Before either of them could whisper something stupid to Teclos, Sera's voice cut cleanly through the murmurs.

"Attention."

The arena became silent.

Sera stood at the front, posture straight, hands clasped behind her back. The morning light filtered through the apple branches above, casting shifting patterns across her dark training clothes.

"You will copy my form," she instructed. "Exactly as I do. So when I move, you move too. When I hold a stance, you do too."

Two hunters stepped forward and positioned themselves along the flanks of the formation—one to the left, one to the right. Their eyes were sharp and analytical.

"They will correct you if needed," Sera continued. "Points will be deducted based on how many times they had to help you."

A few swallowed.

"Let's begin."

She stepped into a wide stance, feet angled outward. Slowly, deliberately, she lowered herself into a deep stretch, one knee bent sharply, the other leg extended long to the side.

"Go as low as you can," she commanded.

Teclos followed, his muscles protesting slightly as he sank into the position. It hurt slightly, but he did it.

"Keep your back straight and shoulders relaxed."

One of the hunters tapped a boy in the front row with two fingers, pushing his shoulder back into place.

They transitioned smoothly into the next position, and the next, each targeting different body parts—multiple people started groaning as the stretches were getting harder and harder.

Ralph wobbled as he looked elsewhere.

"Focus, man," Teclos muttered under his breath.

"I am focusing," Ralph whispered back, absolutely not focusing.

"Yeah, just not on the exercise..." he muttered.

They shifted into a new position.

That was when Teclos made a grave mistake.

He looked up.

Sera flowed into a low, grounded stance, one leg stretched behind her while her torso leaned forward in a smooth, natural curve. Her arms rose in a slow arc above her head, drawing out her form with quiet grace, her back arching just enough to elongate her silhouette.

A few loose strands of hair framed her face as she lifted her chin slightly, her gaze calm, confident, and unhurried—like she was savoring the moment before moving.

It wasn't that her clothes were revealing—they weren't. They were practical and loose. Designed for movement.

But fabric, when stretched at certain angles—

His brain stalled.

A strange warmth shot through his body before he even understood what was happening.

No.

No, no, no.

Not now.

Not here.

His stomach dropped.

Internally, panic exploded.

Dead puppies.

Old grandmas.

Rotting fish.

Shit.

Corpses.

Anything.

He threw the most horrifying, unappealing mental images he could conjure at his own mind like weapons in a desperate war.

Suppress.

Suppress! Goddammit! Do NOT get a boner here!

The hunter to the right glanced at him.

Teclos's face had tightened into a deep, strained frown.

Loric noticed too.

'Huh? He's struggling already?' A smug satisfaction crept into his thoughts.

'He can't even hold this basic stance, hah!'

In his mind, he had already claimed victory.

Meanwhile, Teclos was in fact fighting for his life.

He shifted slightly, trying to adjust his stance without drawing attention. He forced his breathing to slow. Inhale. Exhale. Think of cow shit. Think of dead puppies. Think of—

"Hold," Sera commanded.

The seconds stretched into minutes of torture.

Finally—

"Up."

She straightened fluidly.

Teclos rose immediately, subtly tugging his tunic downward.

"Alright," Sera said calmly, scanning them. "Now that we are properly warmed up, we move on to archery and striking."

Relief nearly made Teclos collapse.

He stood up and pressed his pants down just a fraction more—just in case.

Ralph and Loric saw as well.

For one rare, sacred moment—

They were united in bullying.

Ralph's eyes widened.

"Ohhh," he grinned wickedly. "I see those... stretches got you going, huh? Haha, and you told me to focus."

Loric burst out laughing.

"Yeah, it seems like they did."

Teclos froze.

Ralph leaned closer. "I get you, man. She's hot. I was focusing on her rather than the instructor."

Loric blinked.

"Dude," he wheezed between laughs, "he was ogling the instructor."

Ralph snapped his head toward Teclos.

"No way! Damn... you like old ladies?"

The two of them collapsed into laughter.

Teclos turned a shade of red that rivaled the sunset.

"I— you— shut up!" he hissed, storming toward the archery range before he could make it worse.

Behind him, the laughter faded after a while.

Then silence settled between them again, as Ralph and Loric slowly stopped laughing.

They glanced at each other.

Right...

They did not like each other.

The air turned awkward again, the temporary alliance dissolving as quickly as it had formed.

Across the arena, Gillard lifted the fifth and final round stone onto the platform.

At first, he had approached the trial with visible tension, his movements cautious, shoulders tight.

But his confidence rose like the second boulder did as he lifted it.

Then the third.

Now, with a grunt and a roar of effort, he heaved the last stone onto the platform.

It landed with a heavy thud.

Silence.

A few impressed murmurs could be heard from those watching.

Gillard stepped back and raised both arms high above his head in triumph.

A broad grin split his face.

Out of twenty, only three had managed the fifth stone.

He was one of them.

The anxiety from the morning felt distant now. Small.

He didn't just barely do it.

He dominated this test.

Back at the archery range, five targets stood downrange.

Concentric rings marked their surfaces. The outer rim was worth one point. Moving inward increased the value up to five. The center was worth eight.

A line had been drawn in the dirt about twenty meters away from the targets.

"No crossing this line," Sera instructed as she lifted a standard hunting bow. "This is a normal hunter's bow with no enchantments."

She demonstrated a smooth draw.

"You will be graded on accuracy, form, and consistency."

The first row of youths stepped forward.

They retrieved bows and quivers from the rack, positioning themselves at the line.

"On my command," Sera said, raising her hand.

Strings tightened.

"Loose."

Five arrows flew.

All five missed entirely.

A collective groan rose.

"Again."

Second attempt—two struck the outer rim. The rest missed.

Third—one youth missed for the third time. The others at least hit the target, though far from the center.

"Next."

Teclos, Loric, and Ralph stepped forward.

Two others joined them.

They positioned themselves the same way as the group before them.

"Draw."

Teclos focused.

"Loose."

The arrows flew.

Teclos's struck the fourth ring.

Ralph and Loric both clipped the outer rim, and as expected, they frowned at this result.

Second round.

"Loose."

Teclos adjusted slightly—the angle, his breathing, the timing of his release.

Five points.

Loric hit three.

Ralph hit four.

Third round.

Teclos focused entirely on the arrow tip and the center of the target. The world became still as he waited for the signal. He felt like he could even see dust particles suspended in the air.

"Loose."

He did, and the arrow flew true. It struck dead center.

A clean bullseye.

Teclos punched the air in a guts pose, reveling in his victory.

Ralph hit five.

Loric hit three again, and the moment his arrow struck, Loric kicked the dirt in frustration.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath.

Ralph scowled slightly too.

He had always considered himself the better archer between him and Teclos.

Apparently not today.

Back on the other side of the training grounds, Gillard hoisted the stone onto his shoulder.

The circular dirt path stretched ahead.

Markers lined the outer edge—small flags planted at various distances.

The stone was heavy, but his rhythm was steady.

He passed the first marker.

Then the second.

Sweat started pouring down his forehead.

He reached the final small red flag planted in the earth and then passed it.

Forty meters past the old record, his legs finally buckled.

He let the stone fall with a heavy crash and staggered back, chest heaving.

Then—

He raised both hands again in a second victory pose.

The hunters exchanged glances.

Impressed.

Very impressed.

Again across the field, Teclos placed his bow back on the rack.

After everyone had taken their turns, the bows were returned. The brief twang of strings faded, replaced by the dull thud of boots shifting over packed dirt as they formed lines again.

Sera did not waste time and moved on to the next exercise.

"Target dummies next," she ordered.

The group reformed before the reinforced dummies. Up close, they looked intimidating and sturdier than from afar—thick wooden cores wrapped in layered padding, reinforced at the chest and midsection.

"Three strikes," she reminded them. "And remember, only body-strengthening mana and nothing else."

She stepped aside.

The first five approached.

One by one, they struck.

Only one used proper technique—the others mostly threw wild swings and haymakers. The dummies rocked but remained firm. The one with proper technique was Sammara; she kicked the dummy in three rapid successions, each strike rocking it more, but still it wasn't broken.

"Next," Sera said evenly.

When Teclos's turn came, he rolled his shoulders once more. The earlier embarrassment still lingered in his thoughts.

'Focus, dammit.'

He channeled it into anger and stepped forward, taking a wide stance with arms protecting his head—a classic orthodox stance.

As soon as Sera said begin, he stepped forward with his lead leg and pivoted his whole body.

He drove his fist forward with a hissing exhale, mana reinforcing his muscles to gain speed and maintain his tight swing.

His fist exploded on the dummy's face, and it jolted backward.

A low murmur rose from the hunters watching.

He transitioned into the second strike immediately after, in a fluid and seamless motion.

He pivoted his front leg and hips, jumping slightly. A quick roundhouse kick to the head was delivered. The wooden outer layer of the dummy cracked, and small debris fell away.

The wooden frame groaned.

Continuing the spinning motion, he transitioned into his final strike.

He gathered his mana into his other leg and delivered a back spinning heel kick, pivoting his entire body in sync with the motion.

He struck the head again.

The dummy snapped back violently, lifting slightly from the ground before slamming down.

The head broke. The whole outer layer shattered off from it.

His strikes clearly tested the dummy's limits.

"Good," Sera nodded approvingly. "Consistent and fluid form. You controlled every strike and had enough power behind them. Next."

Teclos stepped back, heart pounding—from the satisfaction of being praised and doing well.

Then Loric stepped forward immediately, aggressive, and shoved Teclos out of the way.

His first strike was explosive—but he put too much power behind it, and his aim was off. With mana flaring unevenly, it caused the blow to glance off-center.

The dummy twisted but did not break or shatter as he'd hoped.

He stopped and corrected his stance for the second attempt, but because he stopped his momentum, it lacked power.

The third was a clean knee to the midsection.

Still, the dummy held, and Loric's jaw tightened in frustration.

Ralph went next.

His strikes were precise, with less raw power. He targeted the dummy's weak spots like the knees or the neck—but they lacked the force to break it.

"Hit harder, even if you have to sacrifice some aim," Sera warned.

When he stepped back, he avoided looking directly at Teclos as the frustration built inside him.

The remaining youths cycled through. A few delivered impressive impacts. One boy overextended and nearly fell on his face.

When the final youth ended his test, Sera nodded once.

"Form a line. You will rotate to the next test soon."

Across the arena, Gillard stood before the final challenge.

The rectangular chiseled block loomed before him—waist-high, broad, and unforgiving.

"Stand here and then push it up, try to topple it if possible," Brahm had explained earlier. "No tricks."

Several youths had already failed.

Gillard crouched near it.

He wedged his fingers beneath the rough-cut edge.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, focusing.

And when he opened them again, he pulled.

Muscles tightened along his arms and back. His boots dug trenches into the dirt.

'Holy shit!'

The first seconds were brutal.

It barely moved.

His breath hissed through clenched teeth as he sank lower.

Gillard growled, pushing as hard as he could, and surged upward.

The slab of solid rock rose with him.

His arms trembled violently, but he stepped forward with a roar and drove through it with his legs.

The chiseled block tipped over—

And crashed onto its other side with a thunderous impact.

The ground shuddered.

After a brief silence, scattered awe followed from the crowd.

Gillard stumbled back, chest heaving—but he was smiling.

He had lifted the fifth stone.

He had shattered the distance record.

And now he was the only one who toppled the block.

Whatever doubt had haunted him that morning was gone.

As the second group of youths returned from their run, everyone prepared themselves mentally for the next exercise.

Chapter 44 - 43 - Race for the Finnish

The training ground had not yet settled from the first trials when the second group returned from their run. The hunters forced the exhausted runners into lines after they rested ten minutes.

After the resting period was over, each instructor then took their own group and changed the location and discipline they would do next.

Gillard now had archery and the striking test, while Ralph, Teclos, and Loric had the running test.

Teclos found himself standing at the forefront of his group, eager to start the run. Again, Ralph and Loric weren't just going to hand the win over without a fight, so they stood next to him.

Instructor Sera stepped forward, her hair was now bound into a ponytail, she seemed ready for the run.

"The second test..." she said, her voice carrying easily across the group, "is a simple endurance test."

A murmur moved through the line as they didn't believe that for even a second.

She ignored them and continued.

"The path goes toward the outer boundary of the village. To the ridge up in the north, where you will continue left toward the woodland, straight through the fields, and back through the western gate. You begin here and finish the run on the training grounds." She smirked, giving them a challenge.

"You might want to give it your best, as you will most likely be running past your parents during the final stretch."

Upon hearing that, everyone got fired up, determined to give their all.

They had to run in a circle.

A grueling path awaited them—uneven, inclined, rocky, tall grass. They didn't know all that yet, but soon enough the determination in their eyes would fade.

"The hunters in front of you will set the pace," Sera then continued. "You aren't allowed to pass them. If you fall behind the hunters running from behind, you return to the village by the nearest cut path. The rear hunters will mark your distance and time."

Her gaze swept over them.

"This is not a sprint. Keep a steady pace as long as you can."

Her eyes stopped on Teclos.

"I repeat. No bravado and No passing the hunters in front."

Then Ralph.

"Do not fight among yourselves."

And Loric.

"Don't hinder your fellow youths."

With that warning to the hotheads in their group, she stepped aside and gave the signal for the start.

The hunters at the front started slowly. Going at a jogging pace, they left the gates. boots striking stone before moving to packed dirt beyond the southern gate.

Teclos settled immediately behind the right-hand lead hunter. He followed him closely so that the others couldn't take his spot.

Ralph was just behind him on his left, while Loric ran on his right side.

Behind them stretched the rest of the trainees, a tight cluster at first—with barely any space left.

Their nerves were clouding their judgment, so they wasted energy on useless things like shoving to get ahead.

Teclos felt that this run was a bit too easy. His legs were fresh. His breathing was steady, and he fell into an easy rhythm within the first hundred strides. He was aware of the path they were taking and that this test would get harder with time... still, he felt like it was lacking.

To his left, Ralph ran light on his feet like always. He was still smiling, and prancing left and right, avoiding mudd puddles and protruding stones.

"This is easier than Talmirs hell training."

Teclos agreed.

When he turned his head for a second, he saw Loric steamrolling through. His stride was like a bull, charging ahead without any regard for the terrain.

'Well, this should be easy,' Teclos thought, as both of them already wasted energy—although in completely different ways.

Looking back at the hunters, they did not struggle. Their backs were straight, shoulders relaxed. The pace was constant, and seemed comfortable for them.

Just then Sera's voice carried from somewhere on the left side. She was running along gracefully, not breaking a sweat at all.

"Spread out. Give yourselves room to run."

The cluster somewhat listened and loosened the formation.

The path then began to rise.

The path to the northern ridge was deceptive. Although it did not rise sharply, there was no drop in the incline or even level ground, for that matter.

Teclos adjusted, leaning forward a fraction from the ankles and watched his breathing.

Ralph was as agile as ever, so the incline didn't pose much trouble. He still needlessly avoided uneven terrain or stones in his path wherever he could. His jaw tightened as it grew harder, and he began to feel a slight burn in his legs.

Loric was even worse than Ralph. Not avoiding tall rocks and branches on the path meant he expended even more energy jumping over them. His breathing grew uneven, and his face flushed red.

Somewhere halfway toward the ridge, the hunters suddenly increased the pace.

It was Subtle and Almost imperceptible.

But Teclos felt it immediately.

Loric noticed half a second later and surged forward with even more force to compensate, nearly tripping over a branch on the path .

Ralph adjusted smoothly, though his breathing also grew uneven.

Behind them, the pack reacted less gracefully.

The incline combined with the pace shift began to thin them out a bit.

Sera's voice cut through again, with some advice.

"Shorten your stride on the hill to conserve some of your energy. Keep your arms compact and tight to your body."

One trainee ignored the advice and powered up recklessly, seeing a chance to overtake everyone.

He paid for it within minutes.

His breathing turned ragged, his stride uneven. He despaired as the rear hunters passed him. They marked the time and the distance while casually running onward.

"Return to town," commanded one of them.

Defeated, he turned back toward the town, kicking dirt and cursing himself out.

Finally, the group reached the ridge, and at the crest, the wind met them.

A cold breeze flowed through them.

It pushed against their chests, cooled their skin, and gave them a second wind, so to speak.

Only problem... it was fairly strong, so they ultimately had to run uphill against the wind.

The hunters didn't react at all. They held their pace steadily, as if the wind meant nothing to them.

Teclos felt the resistance immediately, and for the first time since the run began, a frown crept onto his face. He pushed through it without slowing, but the incline kept rising, and the path grew uneven beneath his feet. Stones jutted out of the ground, forcing them to adjust, sometimes even jump to keep their footing.

He steadied his breathing—rougher now, less controlled—but still he tried to conserve as much strength as possible.

Behind him, Loric and Ralph both groaned as the wind hit them, but neither of them allowed Teclos to pull ahead.

Then the hunters increased the pace again, as if waiting for everyone to struggle.

Ralph forced himself, pushing forward and drawing nearly even with Teclos for a few strides.

Teclos responded in kind with the faintest increase—still controlling his stamina but he would not let either of them claim even the illusion of first place.

Loric saw the exchange, and couldn't be left behind so he pushed closer aswell, inserting himself into the silent rivalry.

Behind them, another few youths faltered under the combined strain of incline and wind.

They tried to hold on.

Failed.

The rear hunters marked their distances and time and moved on.

Then finally, some respite as they descended from the ridge into the woods.

That relief didn't last long.

The terrain shifted under their boots—a hard and rocky path turned into soft soil, it grew dense with overgrowth. Bushes, branches, even some fallen trees in the way.

"Watch your footing!" Sera called. "Lift your feet and don't drag them."

Teclos's focus sharpened. His stride adjusted seamlessly to the uneven ground, avoiding tree roots, moving almost like a deer.

Ralph also had a fairly easy time here.

Loric, on the other hand, was hit by branches and even slowed as he nearly tripped, falling behind them.

And as if on cue the pace increased again.

And this time the change was unmistakable,

They sped up from a semi-fast jog into a full run.

Teclos changed his mind midway through and then felt his heart beat faster, excitement flowing through him. Like a true training maniac, he started treating this as training.

Ralph frowned as he saw him pulling ahead again. He of course not wanting to lose, he picked up the pace too.

For Loric, the terrain itself was already a challenge, as he was too stubborn to listen to Instructor Sera and too stubborn to change his running style. Now, on top of that, the pace had increased again.

Seeing the two push ahead, he grew angry. Really angry.

'They dare ignore me? No! I won't lose!'

Like a mantra—almost like a psychopath—he chanted in his head:

'Never. Never. Never.'

Three more trainees dropped out, either because of the pace, the terrain, or a weak mind.

The hunters remained untouched by fatigue.

The next stretch revealed itself—the fields.

There was no shade from the sun and no incline. Only tall grass and mushy ground, softer and damper than before.

This was the last stretch and where endurance and state of mind revealed themselves fully.

The hunters leaned forward slightly and increased the pace again for the last stretch and the longest sustained push yet.

Teclos had to focus the most now, all leisure gone with only focus remaining.

He moved closer to the hunters' backs—close enough for the grass to be split apart by them and not hinder him.

Ralph tried as well, but by now he was fairly exhausted and couldn't maintain the front position anymore.

Loric's pace also dropped hard. The mushy ground and his unadjusted stride were sapping his strength. It was inevitable—he still refused to listen.

Behind them, the remaining trainees began to fracture even more.

One fought valiantly to stay within reach, breathing desperate, but after several hundred strides the gap widened beyond recovery. As the rear hunters passed him, he slowed, shoulders slumping, and walked towards the town.

Two more clung to the line longer than expected.

One followed Sera's advice.

The other did not.

The latter fell away within minutes.

By the time the western gate came into view in the far distance, only eleven trainees remained.

The hunters did not sprint for the finish.

They did not need to and instead just held a hard, disciplined pace.

Ralph made his final attempt to catch Teclos once he saw the gates.

He lengthened his stride and gained ground.

Loric instantly responded aswell, matching Ralph's speed even.

Teclos didn't look back, but a smile crept onto his face. He reveled in competition, of course—but what he wanted most right now was a win.

He edged half a stride ahead, almost matching the hunters.

The western gate loomed, and the townsfolk had gathered along the edges of the square, watching, drinking, eating.

Some were even betting on who would come first.

They entered the village. The hunters first, of course—but the crowd was shocked.

The running test, although simple in name, was anything but simple.

And everyone there knew it.

To see a young boy keeping pace with the hunters and arrive the same time as them—it was shocking, to say the least.

Talmir even stepped onto a tavern table and shouted, "That's my boy!"

Drunk already and very animated.

That almost made Teclos stumble, this was his first time seeing his father be that lively.

'Huh... I guess Dad has that side to him.'

Teclos crossed the finish line first among the trainees, half a stride behind the hunters.

Ralph followed seconds later, accompanied by Loric, who was half a step slower than Ralph.

The remaining youths arrived moments later.

Everyone except Teclos collapsed at the finish line. Of course, even Teclos was heaving heavily with hands on his knees—but he was standing.

"Line up!" Sera called.

So they did...although barely.

Looking over, Teclos saw a frustrated Gillard holding a bow. From what he could tell, Gillard had roughly the same results as Loric in archery or not worse.

As everyone lined up and waited for the other groups to finish, Teclos and Ralph watched Gillard's final discipline.

Loric followed their gaze as well and frowned.

Across the yard, Gillard exhaled through clenched teeth as he readied himself into a stance.

When he struck the dummy, the impact from his punch lifted it and broke the outer protection.

That drew a few whistles, and even the instructors nodded in approval.

The second strike landed on the head. The dummy hit the ground, debris flying after the impact.

"Damn..." Teclos said.

"Yeah, when it comes to pure power, he's the strongest among us," said Ralph.

Loric just huffed in dissatisfaction.

After the hunters picked the dummy back up, Gillard prepared again.

This time longer, clearly gathering all the mana he had internally for the final punch.

He exploded forward and threw a haymaker directly into the midsection of the dummy.

It shattered.

Blown away, the dummy landed a few feet away.

It was shattered the same way the instructor demonstrated at the start.

Fire ignited in Teclos's eyes as he thought that this was a challenge to him.

Chapter 45 - 44 -insufferable winner

The youths had ten minutes to recover from the tests when the groups were rotated again.

Dust still hung faintly in the air as the stones were placed back into their spots before the low platform, and Teclos stepped forward first for his group.

The five round boulders sat in front of him, ascending in size. Their surfaces were smooth and round.

He lifted the smallest boulder easily and placed it atop the platform fairly quickly.

The second also followed without a struggle.

By the third boulder, he needed a bit more push from his legs and back, but it too was placed atop the platform.

At the fourth, he strained himself visibly. Veins rose along his forearms and biceps, his jaw tightening as he shifted his grip twice before finally hoisting it chest-high and lifting it up.

The stone landed on the platform with a heavy thud, and Teclos took a deep breath.

His confidence waned with the fifth and last stone.

While he was approaching it, he tried to focus once more.

Cupping it from below, his fingers dug beneath its edge. With a last exhale, Teclos braced himself and lifted—

Getting it a few centimeters off the ground, then it rolled off his arms.

The next attempt.

His feet slid a bit closer, exhaling sharply, and he tried again. The boulder rose barely above his knees before it rolled off his arms again.

'Phew....damn, those things are heavy.'

Four out of five.

A respectable result.

Loric stepped forward next, cracking his neck as if already savoring the moment. He powered through the first three without even breaking a sweat. The fourth slowed him down a bit, but not for long.

When he reached the fifth stone, he did not hesitate. With a guttural growl, he dragged it upward, with trembling thighs and shaking shoulders.

For a second, it looked as if he would lose it—

But he persevered and pushed it just high enough so that it rolled onto the platform.

After a hissing exhale and some deep breaths, Loric turned toward Ralph and Teclos with a smug grin, brushing dirt from his palms.

"All five," he muttered, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"That showoff actually managed to do it..."

Ralph said, stepping forward after him.

The first two were easy, but by the third he lost steam, with his breathing already getting ragged.

The fourth stone barely left the ground, and his arms shook violently. He tried to push more but couldn't, releasing the stone back with a thud.

A deep frown plastered his face, frustration written all over it.

Only three.

The second strength discipline began immediately after they finished.

A natural boulder lay on a round track, promising to be a challenge. It was uncut and unpolished, the stone awkward to lift and hold onto.

Teclos bent, locked his arms around it, and lifted. The weight crushed into his chest, forcing his breathing to be shallow and quick. He gritted his teeth and began walking.

Each step was excruciating torture—he made it past ten, fifteen, twenty meters.

When he was about fifteen meters behind Gillard's record, his legs began to shake. He fought for one more step—

But then dropped it.

As he did, he staggered and fell on his back, his chest heaving heavily and sweating profusely.

Next up was Loric.

Smug from the previous discipline, he confidently stepped up.

But just two meters behind Gillard's record, he collapsed forward, letting it fall with a heavy thud.

He had beaten almost everyone, and yet his expression was like he had just eaten shit.

"Dammit! Two meters... just two more goddamn meters!" he spat under his breath.

Ralph's attempt was unremarkable. Average among the boys. Neither shameful nor impressive.

The final test awaited: the rectangular chiseled block of hard stone.

Teclos approached it; by now his arms felt like sponges, soft and mushy. Squatting low, his arms wrapping around the edges, he got ready. With a sharp exhale, he tried to lift it, muscles screaming in protest as the stone rose slowly.

For a single triumphant second, it almost stood upright, and he just had to push it a bit more.

Then his strength vanished.

He fell backward onto the dirt, the block slamming down beside him as he lay staring at the sky, heaving profusely, sweat pouring as if rain had broken over him.

Again, Loric stepped in, full of confidence.

As he set himself into position, hands under the stone and knees bent, he exploded off the ground with a decisive lift. Similar to Gillard, the stone stood upright and then toppled over with a resounding crash.

Ralph was the last of the three.

The stone did not even move.

Everyone in their group finished the strength test, and just as they did, the running group returned. Dust-covered and drenched in sweat, Gillard came in second—only a few seconds behind a black-haired girl.

Gillard collapsed onto his back, staring up at the sky.

"...Tch. I'm second..." he muttered.

The girl merely smiled faintly, hands on her knees.

By the time all three disciplines concluded, even the most energetic among them were drained.

Brahm stepped forward, arms crossed.

"Twenty-minute break. Drink some water and sit down."

The yard dissolved into collapsed bodies and heavy breathing.

Teclos, Ralph, and Gillard found shade beneath the apple tree near the edge of the grounds.

Ralph leaned back against the trunk. "Damn, strength test lowered all my scores."

Teclos huffed a laugh. "Yeah, maybe start lifting weights then."

Ralph pointed out, "May I remind you that you lost to Loric just now."

Teclos grimaced.

Gillard stretched his legs out. "You are fast, I'll give you that." He glanced at Teclos. "And annoyingly consistent in every discipline."

Ralph smirked. "Except when it comes to lifting something heavy, he isn't."

Gillard rolled his shoulders. "Well, that's my territory."

"Punching too, man—you destroyed that dummy," Teclos admitted.

Gillard allowed himself a faint grin. "Obviously."

Ralph sighed. "I'm just... never first, dammit."

They sat in companionable silence for a moment, catching their breath.

"Don't be a wimp," Gillard said calmly. "You got your own strength."

Teclos raised a brow. "His strength is being a wimp... it's how he gets his ladies to punch him in the face."

"Well, at least I'm interested in them. I'm not so sure about you anymore, though."

"Wha—"

Then the bell-like strike of metal carried across the yard.

Brahm had returned.

"Break is over."

Groans erupted, but they rose regardless.

"Form lines, we will march now."

Confused looks spread among the youths.

Brahm turned northward and began walking.

Five hunters fell into step behind him, and the group reluctantly followed.

They passed through the northern gate and into the forest. After an hour and a half of steady marching, the trees thinned.

A massive mountain wall rose before them, imposing.

The line halted, and Brahm barked out orders.

Hunters moved immediately, anchoring ropes high above along the face of the cliff. Each rope extended down the hundred-meter stretch to a narrow ledge visible near the top.

"Climbing?" Ralph muttered. "Why?"

"To waste our time?" Loric offered bitterly.

Brahm turned to the youths.

"From your expressions, it's clear you are wondering why this matters."

His gaze swept across them.

"In battle, mana runs dry. When that happens, your body remains your only tool. And high ground means survival in a lot of cases."

He paced back and forth a bit, then continued.

"Firstly and simply, climbing preserves mana."

"Secondly, some beasts sense distortions in the air when mana is used. A hunter who moves silently along the wall is harder to detect."

"Ambushes require elevation."

"Looking for herbs, nests, carcasses—being high above ground gives you a nice vantage point and overview."

He let the silence settle.

"So yes. You climbing isn't a waste of time."

The ropes were secured.

"We will make teams again, five at a time. One thing to note is that the rope is for safety only. You will not use it; if you do, you fail."

He pointed upward.

"One hundred meters to that ledge. That is your goal."

Names were called.

Some barely made five meters before freezing in fear. Others slipped. A few climbed steadily but faltered near the outward bulge at fifty meters.

Eventually—

Teclos and Ralph were called.

They stepped forward, harnessed and ready to climb.

Then their eyes met.

"This time I'll beat you," Ralph said seriously.

"Hah! You can try."

Brahm gave the signal to start.

They bolted onto the wall fast—hands finding purchase quickly, and their feet pushing forward.

At fifty meters, the wall leaned outward, and they adjusted smoothly.

Behind them, only Sammara remained climbing above the fifty mark.

At seventy meters, the difficulty spiked even more.

Holds narrowed and the wall leaned toward them.

Their legs burned.

Sammara slipped at seventy, the rope catching her as she gasped, exhausted.

But Ralph and Teclos were not done yet.

Ninety meters.

Ninety-five.

Both were so focused on reaching the top, they didn't register the cheers coming from below.

Ninety-nine meters.

As they neared the finish, Ralph led by half a meter.

And that half-meter was all he needed.

He pulled himself onto the ledge first.

"YES!" he shouted, pumping his fist in triumph. "Finally!"

Teclos hauled himself up seconds later, breathing heavily.

Ralph laughed, triumphant and insufferable.

Teclos muttered under his breath, already knowing he would never hear the end of this.

The applause from below was scattered but genuine.

Ralph stood near the edge of the ledge, his chest rising and falling in sharp pulls, arms lifted high as if he had just conquered the mountain itself.

"Did you see that?!" he shouted down, grinning like a madman. "I told you I would win! In your face, haha!"

His voice echoed faintly off the ledge and drifted back toward the people far below.

Teclos rolled onto his back, staring up at the thin strip of sky above the cliff. His fingers trembled—from exertion. His forearms felt flayed open from the inside. Every flex sent a dull burn up to his shoulders.

"You were half a step faster," he muttered.

"A win is a win," Ralph replied immediately, dropping down beside him. He leaned back on his palms and looked over, still flushed with victory. "And I'll savor this one."

Teclos snorted. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

A gust of wind swept across the ledge, cool and sharp, drying the sweat on their skin and replacing the heat with some much-needed freshness. From up here, the people looked small, and the view was breathtaking.

A hunter stepped closer, offering each of them a firm nod. "Nicely done. You both adjusted well at the overhang."

Ralph straightened a bit at that. Praise from a hunter was no small thing.

"You nearly lost your footing at seventy meters," the hunter added casually.

Ralph blinked. "I—"

"But you recovered well," the man finished.

Teclos smirked faintly. "Nearly."

"Oh, shut up, second place," Ralph muttered.

Below, more youths attempted the climb. One slipped at the fifty-meter bulge and swung awkwardly on the rope, legs kicking until a wind-aligned hunter gently redirected him toward the wall to descend safely. Another froze halfway up, clinging to the stone with wide, terrified eyes. Gillard and Loric made it to the seventy-meter mark but then slipped and fell down.

Teclos watched in silence.

From up here, the wall didn't look as merciless as it had from below.

He sat up, resting his forearms on his knees. "You were good," he admitted quietly.

Ralph's grin softened. "You too."

For a brief second, Teclos thought that the rivalry faded.

Then Ralph added, "But alas, I was better than you. Better luck next time, you slowpoke."

Teclos threw a small pebble at him.

"Oi!"

Two more trainees reached the ledge and barely crawled over the edge, shaking. One lay flat immediately, staring at nothing. The other laughed in disbelief, high on adrenaline.

Eventually, their names were called.

Teclos leaned forward instinctively.

Brahm signaled for them to go down. As everyone finished their attempts at climbing, all four tied the rope around themselves again and began their assisted descent.

The hunters held them steady and slowly lowered them down the wall.

Ralph laughed at Gillard for falling at the seventy mark.

"Why did you have to let him win? He's like an annoying fly buzzing around now."

"Well, I tried, you know," shrugged Teclos.

"Guess some of us are born to stay on top... and some just slip off the wall and fall," jabbed Ralph again.

This time Teclos punched him in the shoulder, and Gillard kicked him in the shin.

"Oi! Stop hitting me!" Ralph complained.

Gillard glanced at him. "You have a punchable face."

Teclos laughed. "Yeah, and we are restraining ourselves a lot already."

Brahm then gathered everyone again and gave the order to march back to the town.

The hunters directed them toward a narrow switchback path carved into the mountain's side—a flatter route back toward Kolma.

By the time they reached the town again, the afternoon sun had shifted noticeably.

And Brahm stood waiting, with arms folded behind his back.

He surveyed them all—dust-covered, sweat-soaked, breathing hard.

He was ready to announce the final discipline.

Chapter 46 - 45 - Frozen and Melted

By the time they returned from the mountain, the sun had begun its slow descent, casting long golden shadows across the town square. Boots dragged across the path and the youths' shoulders sagged. Even the loudest among them had gone quiet; not even a peep was heard from the whole group except for the steady rhythm of marching steps.

Brahm marched at the front smiling and happy, as if he had merely taken a leisurely stroll, already optimistic about the town's future.

They walked through town, receiving sympathetic glances from the townsfolk as they passed, dirty and beaten.

When they reached the space before the guild hall, Brahm stopped abruptly and turned.

"Alright, Line up."

A collective groan nearly escaped the whole group. Most of them were dead on their feet. Even Teclos, who had held himself upright through sheer stubbornness all day, felt his legs trembling faintly.

'Again?'

This was bordering on one of Talmir's infamous "character-building" workouts — the kind where muscles and mind often both failed under the pressure.

Still, they lined up.

Brahm ignored the exhausted and hostile glares.

"In here," he announced, voice steady and merciless, "will be the last test today."

Relief flickered across faces — briefly.

"It is also a newly added addition to the coming-of-age ceremony. The chambers I am about to show you were completed two months ago during the renovations."

Concern replaced relief instantly.

Ralph leaned toward Teclos and Gillard, whispering, "What do you think they're going to have us do in there?"

Teclos shrugged.

"Beats me."

Gillard did the same.

Ralph frowned. "This is why muscle-brained apes are useless," he muttered under his breath. "Can't even hold a conversation..."

Teclos smirked faintly despite his fatigue.

"Just shut up and listen, will you."

Brahm handed a rolled parchment to one of the elders — clearly interim grading notes — before continuing.

"These chambers hold up to forty people each. We will split you down the middle again. Hunters will accompany you for safety as well."

He turned toward the entrance.

"For now — follow me."

Teclos had passed the guild hall countless times.

But he had never truly been inside it, except for that one time years ago.

As they stepped inside, a large lobby awaited them with a high painted ceiling and stone pillars along the sides. Fatigue faded for a moment, replaced by awe.

The Guild Hall dominated the center of town like a fortress built from stone, blood, sweat, and tears. It looked imposing and eternal.

Built from thick gray stone blocks darkened by decades of rain and smoke, the structure rose three full stories above ground – broad, rectangular, and unadorned. It was not built to impress nobles. It was built to endure and to be the last shelter if the walls were ever breached.

The reinforced entrance doors loomed tall enough for a mounted rider to pass through without lowering his head. Above them, the guild crest had been carved deep into the stone – so deep that even time itself would struggle to erase it.

Inside, the main hall opened wide and high, supported by heavy stone pillars blackened from years of lantern smoke. The ceiling stretched nearly two stories upward, allowing noise to rise and disperse – and it did.

The air carried layered sounds: boots on stone in hurried steps, clinking armor as it was fitted on, murmured negotiations near the reception tables, bursts of laughter, the sharp edge of arguments. It was alive, full of activity and people – until suddenly the sounds stopped as heads turned toward them.

More than one youth suddenly grew nervous.

They moved onward.

To the right stood long oak reception counters scarred by knives, ink stains, and the occasional fit of anger. Behind them hung quest boards covered in pinned parchments — escort missions, gathering requests, monster exterminations beyond the northern ridge.

To the left were tables and benches where hunters sat and compared injuries, boasted victories, quietly suffered or drank their worries away. Beyond that lay medical chambers — practical rooms where healers treated wounds too severe for field kits.

And farthest from the entrance were two wide staircases built into the wall.

One descended into what seemed to be a cellar. Strangely, it was sealed with an iron door that had no visible handle.

The other ascended into what appeared to be the administrative section of the guild hall.

Between them rested the Four Ring — a carved circular mechanism embedded in stone. Teclos watched as Brahm activated it. The ring hummed faintly with mana before unlocking the sealed passage downward.

Above ground were spare rooms, training chambers, vaults, offices.

Below ground...

The air shifted.

Cold escaped from the cellar.

Heavy and stale.

The first subterranean floor held reinforced storage rooms, monster-part processing chambers, holding cells, and several sealed doors.

Teclos' steps slowed.

Holding cells...

The second underground level felt different. Mana-sealed chambers lined the corridors. Thick stone walls. Sigils etched into the bedrock itself.

The entire structure felt less like a building and more like a layered machine.

From the outside, it was large — the largest building in town.

But from within, it seemed even larger, holding many secrets. It was truly the cornerstone and heart of Kolma.

Even some hunters murmured quietly about the renovations. Brahm had not merely upgraded the guild hall with one or two rooms and a fresh coat of paint.

He had fortified it — added an entire additional floor above and below ground. With many new facilities.

At the end of the lowest corridor stood two massive iron-bound doors.

Brahm stopped before them and turned.

"This is where the final test will be held."

The corridor was quiet enough to hear someone swallow.

"For safety reasons, if you feel overwhelming discomfort, you may withdraw immediately. Hunters will escort you out if you pass out."

He gestured to the doors.

"These are climate-altering chambers. One fueled by volcanic rune stone shards. One by ice rune stone shards."

A ripple passed through the hunters accompanying them. Even they seemed shocked.

"You will enter the chambers, sit down, and endure the heat or cold for as long as you can."

He continued explaining — how to circulate mana through their bodies, how to build internal resistance, how the test would last thirty minutes per chamber, how quitting early would not disqualify them but the time would be noted.

When he finished, he asked, "Questions?"

Teclos raised his hand.

Brahm's brow lifted slightly. "Yes?"

"How much did this cost?"

The hunters perked up their ears.

Brahm looked at him and answered flatly.

"A lot."

Teclos nodded slowly.

His gaze drifted briefly back toward the holding cells they had passed.

Chambers that manipulated extreme heat and cold...

Useful for training like this.

Also useful for other things, like torture.

The dark thought lingered longer than he liked.

Brahm turned back to the doors.

"Alright, split up and enter."

When the doors opened, a violent mixture of heat and cold surged into the corridor, clashing currents twisting the air.

The sixty youths split in half.

Teclos, Ralph, and Loric entered the volcanic chamber.

The moment Teclos stepped through, it felt like walking into the mouth of a monster and being swallowed alive.

If he had to describe it—

It was like stepping through the gates of hell.

The mana in the chamber felt warped. Distorted. Oppressive.

Stone benches lined the circular walls. Rune-etched crystals embedded between stones glowed faintly red.

They sat down and were immediately pressed by the Heat .

Their breathing became ragged at once.

Each inhale felt like swallowing fire.

Some youths lasted barely three minutes before panic overtook them.

"I can't breathe!"

Hunters escorted them out swiftly.

Teclos closed his eyes and focused on his mana.

This chamber reminded him of a Sauna.

He remembered them from his old world – small wooden rooms filled with dry heat.

Only this was ten times worse.

But the memory helped nonetheless.

As he began circulating mana slowly, carefully, through his entire body.

It formed a faint internal barrier – not blocking the heat entirely, but dulling its ferocious bite.

Sweat poured from him in waves; he was soaked almost instantly.

His skin burned.

Muscles still ached from earlier trials.

Beside him, Ralph tried to be brave at first.

"So... easy..." he muttered weakly.

Five minutes later, he was silent, jaw clenched, he was barely enduring and Loric fared no better.

Time stretched and each second felt like eternity.

Teclos felt exhaustion creeping in. Lifting stones, running hills, climbing cliffs — all of it weighing on him...on all of them.

Maintaining mana flow required discipline.

He treated it like training to forget the pain.

Like forging steel.

He entered a deeply focused state.

By the time a hunter tapped his shoulder, he wasn't sure how long had passed.

"It's time."

Thirty minutes had passed.

It had felt like eternity.

He opened his eyes slowly and stood on unsteady legs.

When he stepped out, he realized the chamber was empty.

He had been the last one to endure.

Outside, the others from both chambers stood in various states of recovery.

No one else had lasted the full duration.

Teclos smirked faintly at Ralph and Gillard.

"I win this one."

Ralph stared at him. "You're a masochist dude."

Gillard shook his head. "You really do love pain."

Teclos just shrugged.

His insides still felt like molten iron.

It had been hell.

But he didn't let it show.

After ten minutes of recovery, Brahm ordered them into the second chamber.

This time, Teclos entered the ice chamber.

The cold was unbearable — even worse than the heat.

It was immediate and Violent.

Their bones felt like they could fracture at the faintest touch.

Breathing felt like inhaling shards of glass.

Frost formed along hair and lashes within seconds.

Stone benches radiated bone-deep chill.

Some lasted five minutes.

Some less.

Teclos forced mana to circulate again.

Different from the heat chamber, this time mana helped preserve warmth inside his body so he wouldn't freeze solid.

Instead of waves of sweat, frost formed along his skin.

His limbs trembled. His jaw remained clenched the entire time.

Vision blurred as frost crusted over his eyes. He closed them to be safe.

Time froze.

Quite literally.

Every second stretched painfully long.

It felt like being inside the stomach of a wraith.

When the hunter tapped him again, he tried to open his eyes.

They were frozen shut.

The hunter helped him stand as he trembled uncontrollably and guided him forward since he could not see.

When he emerged, his hair had turned white with frost. His skin nearly blue.

Ralph and Gillard stared.

He moved slowly, and stiffly.

Even the hunters looked impressed — and slightly concerned.

To endure both chambers fully — after everything else that day —

It bordered on insanity.

Or obsession.

Or both.

Teclos sat down next to Gillard and Ralph. They remained silent.

Shivering and with burning eyes, he asked, "What? No snarky comment?"

"There is something seriously wrong with you," Gillard replied, still shaking aswell.

"I think his training obsession has turned into a mental illness by now," Ralph added.

Gillard nodded in agreement, as did several others who had overheard.

Teclos didn't mind.

If that was what it took to be first, he would gladly accept the criticism and push forward.

After all, this was his second life.

If not now, when?

After another ten minutes passed and everyone had mostly recovered, Brahm spoke for the final time that day.

"Everyone is dismissed. Good job enduring the trials so far. Tomorrow is the final evaluation day. Get some rest, and we will see each other tomorrow."

And with that—

The day finally ended.

Teclos barely remembered walking home.

His body moved on instinct alone, one heavy step after another through the dimly lit streets of town. The night air was cool, but after the ice chamber it barely registered.

When he opened the door, Saldia and Talmir were already waiting inside.

"There you are—" Saldia began, relief washing over her face.

Teclos gave a faint nod.

"I'm home."

That was all he managed.

He walked past them without another word, entered his room, and collapsed face-first onto the bed.

Still dressed and in his boots.

He was asleep before his head even properly settled into the pillow.

Saldia stood frozen for a moment.

Her brows furrowed.

"He didn't even eat... he looks pale... do you think something happened?"

Talmir glanced toward his room, listening to the silence. A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't worry," he said calmly. "He's just exhausted."

Saldia didn't look entirely convinced.

But she nodded slowly.

Teclos didn't move a muscle.

There was only darkness and deep, deep dreamless sleep.

Chapter 47 - 46 - Looking Noble

That night, Teclos did not remember walking to his room.

He vaguely recalled pushing the door open with his shoulder. Boots still on. Belt still fastened. Shirt half-tucked and stiff with dried sweat from the heat and frost alike.

When he reached the bed, he just fell on it.

The mattress barely creaked before oblivion claimed him whole.

No tossing.

No turning.

No thoughts.

When he woke up again, every muscle in his body protested and screamed.

His shoulders burned from lifting the stones, his forearms felt useless from climbing, and his thighs throbbed from the run. He hadn't felt this exhausted since Talmir's first training.

He blinked slowly.

Birds chirped outside the window. A thin ribbon of sunlight slipped through the wooden shutters, stretching across the floorboards and crawling toward his bed like a wake-up call.

Dreading to stand up.

He rolled onto his side—immediately regretting it—and pushed himself upright with a quiet hiss.

"Shit..." he muttered to no one.

Today.

Was the final day of the Coming of Age ceremony.

After today, he would be recognized as an adult of the town. Free to choose his path openly. No longer just a promising youth training under watchful eyes.

And more importantly—

Today was the rune stone evaluation.

The moment where his greatness would be shown before the entire town.

That thought stirred excitement in his chest,

and a faint thread of nerves.

He swung his legs off the bed and stood up carefully. He almost fell from the pain in his legs but managed to catch himself.

He lifted his arms and tried to stretch once, experimentally, but the soreness that came from that simple stretch was brutal.

After walking to the basin slowly, he washed his face in cool water, the shock clearing some of the fog of sleep.

Getting dressed and stepping into the main room, the smell of a simple breakfast filled the air and assaulted his nose—toasted bread, lightly fried eggs, herbs.

His mother stood near the stove, humming a cheerful tune, moving with bright energy that seemed criminally out of place at this hour.

She even whistled between verses.

Teclos stared at her.

"You are in a happy mood, did something good happen?" he asked dryly.

She turned around with bright, sparkling eyes.

"Because my son becomes an adult today!"

She set down the pan and walked over, brushing imaginary dust from his shoulder. "You did so well yesterday. I heard everything."

Of course she had.

News traveled fast in town.

"You pushed yourself too hard, though," she added gently, though pride shone unmistakably behind the words. "But that's nothing new for you."

He gave a small shrug.

Across the table, he saw his father sitting on a chair.

His head was tilted back.

Eyes were half-closed.

Arms hung loosely at his sides as if only gravity kept him seated.

He looked... dead.

Teclos blinked in confusion and then greeted him.

"Morning."

His father made a sound.

It might have been a grunt.

After a moment, one thumb lifted slowly into the air in acknowledgment.

Teclos stared at it.

"...Rough night, huh?"

His mother coughed lightly into her fist, suddenly very interested in rearranging plates.

His father's eyes opened just enough to fix Teclos with a long, unreadable look.

"Sleep," he muttered. "Is important."

Then his head tipped back again.

Teclos slowly nodded.

"Ok?"

His mother returned to the table, placing food in front of him with entirely too much enthusiasm.

"You'll sit before the rune stone today," she said, practically glowing. "Everyone will be there. The elders. The hunters. The neighbors. Even old Mira said she wouldn't miss it. Your talent will finally be revealed, and everyone will finally bow their heads in shame once they know how talentless they are!"

Teclos nearly choked on his bread.

"Mom?"

"Sorry."

She leaned forward slightly. "Show them."

There was an odd pressure in her tone.

His father's voice drifted lazily across the table.

"You got this, son."

Teclos narrowed his eyes.

"Are you even going to be awake by then?"

He gave a weak thumbs up.

Teclos exhaled sharply through his nose.

His mother smiled warmly at both of them.

For a moment, the soreness faded into the background.

Today wasn't just about proving himself to the town.

It was about making them proud—knowing they were watching.

He finished eating, stood up, and adjusted his sleeves.

Then he stepped toward his room, pausing only briefly.

"Try not to fall asleep during the ceremony," he said to his father, giving him a final reminder.

A thumbs up lifted weakly for a third time.

His mother laughed softly.

And the door closed behind him.

Today's proceedings would begin later than the physical trials of the previous days. No dawn assembly. No suffering. The elders had announced that the rune stone evaluation would take place closer to midday, when the sun stood high and the entire town could gather without excuse.

Which meant something rare in Teclos' life.

Time.

Time to wash properly.

Time to dress properly.

Time to look like something other than a training-obsessed maniac or a hobo.

He stood in his room again, staring at the folded clothes laid out carefully on the table.

His mother had prepared them.

The tunic was deep charcoal, almost black, but woven with faint silver threading that caught the light subtly when it moved. The collar was structured but not stiff, lined with a darker trim stitched in careful, flowing patterns. The fabric was thick, high quality, tailored to his broadening shoulders and tapering slightly at the waist.

The trousers matched, fitted cleanly and tucked into polished leather boots that had clearly been oiled more than necessary.

Beside them lay a short mantle—dark gray with a muted silver clasp shaped like a simple ring.

Unmistakably formal attire.

Teclos ran a hand over the fabric and dressed himself.

When he stepped back and caught his reflection in the bronze mirror, he paused.

He looked...

Noble.

Someone that could be standing at a noble ball or party.

He adjusted the mantle once—pleased—then left the room.

Talmir stood near the doorway, adjusting his cuffs with the serious concentration of a man preparing for battle—though the faint shadows under his eyes betrayed him and revealed how tired he was from the previous night.

He wore a long, tailored coat of deep iron-gray, trimmed with subtle black embroidery along the seams. The shoulders were structured, the sleeves fitted, the coat falling just past his knees. Beneath it, a dark vest layered over a high-collared tunic, fastened with simple metal clasps. His boots were polished to a dull shine, and his hair had been combed back.

He looked every bit like a seasoned general.

He looked dangerous, composed, respectable, and mildly exhausted...

Teclos stopped beside him, and they glanced at each other.

The resemblance was unmistakable.

Same dark hair.

Same tailored suits.

Same quiet and stoic demeanor.

Like father, like son.

Talmir's mouth twitched into a subtle smile, clearly proud.

And then, from the kitchen, came the soft sound of fabric shifting.

The true star arrived.

Saldia stepped into the room.

Her hair, normally tied back for work, fell in soft waves down her back, pinned delicately at the sides with small silver clasps shaped like leaves. The red dress she wore was deep crimson—not bright, but rich—fitted at the waist and flowing elegantly to her ankles. The sleeves were long and narrow, embroidered subtly near the cuffs with intricate vine patterns in darker thread. The neckline was modest, but the cut framed her shoulders gracefully.

She had even dusted a faint touch of color across her cheeks.

She looked—

Radiant.

Talmir blinked, and Teclos stared.

"...Who are you," he asked carefully, "and what have you done with my mother?"

Saldia placed a hand on her hip.

"Oh? Is it that shocking?"

Talmir cleared his throat and complimented her in a very serious demeanor.

"You look beautiful, honey."

She laughed—soft and warm—but there was the faintest hint of pink rising to her cheeks.

"It is a special day," she said, smoothing the fabric lightly. "I can try once in a while."

Teclos exchanged a slow glance with his father.

They both nodded in silent agreement.

Approved.

Talmir stepped closer to her, offering his arm without a word.

For once, he looked almost nervous.

She took it.

"Well," Teclos said. "Let's not keep the entire town waiting."

Outside, doors were opening across the street. Families stepped out dressed in their finest and the square near the guild hall was already beginning to fill—murmurs, laughter, the rustle of layered fabrics and polished boots against stone.

The Coming of Age ceremony was not merely a test.

It was a declaration from every family that was participating.

And today, under the full light of the sun, Teclos would sit before the rune stone.

Everyone would be watching.

The door closed behind them with a solid wooden thud.

And the street went quiet.

There were still footsteps, murmurs from people, the distant creak of shutters—but it was quiet in that particular way when your attention shifts to something else.

Heads turned one by one.

Teclos noticed it immediately—the people subtly slowing down, the way the conversations died off mid-sentence. People straightened instinctively as his family stepped fully into the street, as if they were nobles.

They simply walked.

And somehow that made them the center of attention for everyone.

Saldia's crimson dress caught the morning sun, deep red gleaming richly against the muted stone of the houses. Talmir's iron-gray coat fell perfectly along his frame, structured and commanding. Teclos walked between them, mantle resting over his shoulders, posture naturally upright from years of drills.

A group of younger girls near the bakery froze entirely.

One of them whispered something, and another covered her mouth.

Two pairs of eyes locked onto Teclos—then quickly darted away when he glanced in their direction. They were blushing.

A third girl failed to look away in time.

Teclos lifted one eyebrow slightly.

She nearly tripped over.

He smirked faintly.

'Hah! Hell yeah... I'm finally hot! Hahah.' he laughed to himself in his mind.

To the side of the road, a pair of older women exchanged glances—not at him, but at Talmir. Their eyes lingered a fraction longer than was polite. The fit of the coat. The quiet authority in his stride.

One murmured something about "still in his prime, I see."

Meanwhile, several men's gazes shifted toward Saldia.

Stunned.

Because most of them had only ever seen her in work clothes, sleeves rolled up, hands dusted with crushed herbs, hair tied back carelessly.

Although she had that subtle beauty, this—

This was something else entirely.

A noble lady masquerading as a town herbalist.

By the time they reached the main stretch leading toward the town square, a subtle distance had formed behind them.

People were following them, as if a procession had begun without announcement.

Up ahead, two familiar figures waited near the well.

Ralph and Gillard.

And beside them—

Their families.

Ralph's parents looked pleasantly surprised when they saw them approach.

Gillard's family too; however, there was another person beside them.

Standing beside Gillard was a massive man who looked like he had been forced into formal clothing against the laws of nature.

Broad shoulders strained the seams of a dark brown suit jacket that had clearly been tailored as generously as possible. His arms were thick as carved timber beams, veins faintly visible even at rest. His brown, curly hair was cut shorter than Gillard's, and a large bushy beard framed a square jaw that looked permanently set in stone.

It was Iron Hammer Drada, the best blacksmith in this region.

He did not look uncomfortable, but the suit sure did.

Losing to his muscles, with his presence radiating quiet intimidation.

Even dressed formally, he looked capable of lifting a cart.

Gillard noticed Teclos' stare.

"That's my father," he said plainly.

Teclos nodded once.

"Figures."

The large man's eyes shifted toward Talmir.

A hunter and a blacksmith.

A slow nod followed from both sides.

A mutual acknowledgment.

Ralph broke the tension immediately.

"Daamn," he muttered, looking Teclos up and down. "Life ain't fair."

Teclos tilted his head.

"What?"

Ralph gestured vaguely at all three of them and pointed behind toward the crowd that gathered.

"Look at you guys. You look like nobles walking through town."

Gillard grunted in agreement.

"Yeah. If someone told me you owned half the land here, I'd believe it."

Saldia laughed softly, clearly pleased.

"Oh, thank you, boys," she said warmly. "You two look just as handsome as Teclos."

Ralph brightened immediately.

Gillard stiffened slightly, unsure how to respond.

Teclos snorted.

"Yeah," he said dryly. "In your dreams."

Ralph shot him a look.

"Guess you got the looks but not the grace from your mother."

Gillard crossed his arms.

"He doesn't have the brains either."

Even Talmir's mouth twitched faintly.

Saldia simply shook her head, amused.

Gillard's father finally spoke, his voice deep and resonant.

"You three done playing around?" he asked, serious in his tone.

Teclos looked up at him.

"We're just warming up, sir."

A brief pause followed that statement.

Then, unexpectedly—

The big man barked out a short laugh.

"Cheeky," he said. "Confidence suits you, lad."

They all fell into step together, the combined families moving toward the town square.

By the time they reached the square, it was already filling with people. Stalls had been cleared aside. The central platform where the rune stone would be placed stood prepared. Elders gathered near the front, dressed in ceremonial robes, and the hunters lined the edges, arms crossed and observing the crowd.

Children darted around.

Older townsfolk took seats along the stone benches.

Teclos exhaled slowly as they took their place in the crowd, among the other families.

Ralph leaned slightly closer.

"Nervous?"

Teclos kept his eyes forward.

"No, I was born ready."

Gillard glanced at him.

"Sure..."

A ripple passed through the crowd when, at the far side of the square, the guild hall doors opened.

And Brahm stepped out.

Chapter 48 - 47 - Witness me

The murmurs in the square softened slowly into silence as Brahm stepped onto the raised wooden platform.

Today, even he looked different.

Gone was the plain attire, the rolled sleeves, the dust of the yard clinging to his boots. Instead, he wore a long, dark coat trimmed with subtle silver threading along the seams.

The fabric was neat, structured, and formal without being too ornate. His hair had been combed back neatly, and the short beard he always had was trimmed. A ceremonial clasp bearing the guild's crest fastened his collar.

He looked like a judge.

Like the pillar of the growing town that he truly was.

He stood at the center of the platform and let his gaze sweep across the square — over the elders in their layered robes, over the gathered hunters, over the families dressed in their finest.

When he finally spoke, his voice effortlessly reached everyone.

"Welcome, everyone."

It was a simple greeting, still full of authority.

"Today marks the final day of this coming-of-age ceremony."

A few parents straightened in anticipation. Some of the youths swallowed unconsciously.

"For the last few days, these youths have tested their strength, their endurance, their will, and their discipline. They have bled, fallen, risen again, and pushed beyond their limits."

His eyes briefly passed over Teclos, Ralph, and Gillard—acknowledging their effort.

"Today," Brahm continued, "these fine young men and women will choose their path."

A ripple of anticipation moved through the crowd.

"Some will pursue the hunter's road. Some will seek crafting, some will choose to be a trader, or accept a scholarship. Some may leave this town in search of greater horizons."

He paused, letting the words settle in the minds of the people.

"And even if they do not succeed immediately — even if they stumble or fail — Kolma will not cast them aside."

His tone was firm.

"This town does not abandon its own. Kolma will welcome them with open arms and put them to work. There is always a place for those willing to give effort."

That made most people there nod their heads. Murmurs of approval rippled across the crowd.

Relief flickered across more than a few parents' faces.

Behind him, four hunters stepped forward carrying something between them.

The rune stone.

It was not large enough to be imposing with size alone—roughly the width of a chest—but its presence demanded attention.

It was perfectly square with clean edges and symmetrical faces.

It rested upon a wooden pillar roughly one meter tall. The pillar itself was carved in a spiraling weave; several wooden bands had been twisted upward around a central core. Blue runes were etched along the spirals in careful sequences, each line precise, glowing faintly like veins of captured sky.

The stone atop it was a darker shade—not quite gray, nor pitch black, but something in between. A deep shade that absorbed light rather than reflected it.

Red runes covered every visible surface.

They weren't random, but were intentionally placed.

Pulsing softly, faintly but unmistakable. Like it was alive.

This was no ordinary rock. Even those with weaker mana could feel it—a subtle pressure in the air around it, like it was the focal point of a contained storm of power.

These stones were apparently supplied by the emperor himself.

The hunters secured it firmly to the pedestal.

Brahm stepped beside it.

"This artifact," he said, resting one hand lightly against the wooden pillar, "will reveal what effort you have put in throughout the years."

His gaze shifted toward the youths standing together in their formal attire.

"I will call you up here, one by one."

A hush fell completely over the square.

He then glanced at a parchment in his hand.

"Eldric."

A boy near the middle stiffened.

"Step forward."

For a heartbeat, he did not move.

But with a nudge from someone behind him, he finally stepped forward, stiff like a log.

His steps resounded loudly on the stone as he stomped his way over, no doubt a nervous wreck.

Teclos watched carefully.

Eldric's shoulders were tense and his jaw was clenched.

His parents leaned forward from the crowd, hands clasped tightly and murmuring prayers to the gods.

When he reached the platform, Brahm gestured toward the stone.

"Place your palm in the center," he instructed calmly.

Carved into the front face of the cube was the outline of a hand—slightly recessed, shaped to fit a palm perfectly.

Eldric swallowed and placed his hand against it.

For a moment—

There was nothing.

His blood drained from his face as nothing happened, but then Brahm instructed him further, with a palm on his face and shaking his head in disbelief.

"Channel your mana already, boy."

A few chuckles escaped the crowd.

He inhaled sharply and began channeling his mana, beet red from embarrassment.

The red runes flickered to life and brightened.

One by one, they ignited like embers catching flame.

A low hum vibrated through the pedestal, resonating with the blue runes spiraled along the wood.

Then—

A dome expanded outward from the stone.

It moved quickly and smoothly, like a breath exhaled in winter, visible. Within a heartbeat, it formed a translucent sphere around Eldric, roughly three meters in radius.

A faint white mist filled its surface, swirling softly like fog trapped inside glass.

Gasps broke out among some of the onlookers.

Teclos leaned forward slightly; although he was very interested, he didn't want to be obvious.

On the inner surface of the mist, runes began to appear.

They did not all manifest at once, but instead wrote themselves slowly.

Line by line.

First was overall vitality.

A numerical value shimmered into place, followed by a glyph indicating physical health.

Next was current mana capacity.

The crowd murmured, intrigued.

And lastly—

Mana circles.

The runes shifted, listing their locations—core, heart, mind—and the number formed in each.

Stability indicators followed, each circle marked with a percentage-like rune describing density and cohesion between the circles.

Finally—

Affinity appeared.

The last set of runes glowed slightly brighter before settling into place.

Eldric had a wind affinity.

A modest glow pulsed once in confirmation.

The dome remained for several long seconds, allowing everyone to read it.

Eldric stared at it in awe and wonder.

Then, slowly, the light dimmed.

The dome collapsed inward like mist dispersing under sunlight.

The red runes on the cube faded back to their resting glow, and silence held the square for half a breath longer.

Then the murmurs began in earnest.

Some impressed by the stone's function.

Some calculating where to put Eldric to work.

And his parents, finally relieved that their son made it through.

Brahm nodded once.

"Well done. Step down now."

Eldric withdrew his hand, looking dazed, and returned to his family.

Brahm then glanced at the parchment again.

"Next."

The name rang out, and another youth stepped forward.

Then another.

And another.

One by one they approached the stone, pressed their trembling palms into the carved outline, and fed their mana into the waiting runes.

Each time the red runes flared to life. Each time the white dome blossomed outward in a soft rush of mist. Each time the runes inscribed themselves across the curved surface, laying bare effort, talent, and their limits to the people's eyes.

Some results were modest—two circles, slightly unstable. Average vitality. A narrow mana capacity that hinted at years more work ahead.

Others drew murmurs of approval.

A girl with sharp eyes, Samara, revealed three circles—one in the core, one in the heart, one newly forming in the mind. Her water affinity glowed bright blue and clean. And after she was done, applause followed her off the stage.

Then Gillard's name was called up.

He stepped forward without any hesitation.

His broad shoulders covered the rune stone entirely, confident as if to say that he already belonged there. When he pressed his palm to the imprint and channeled his mana, the response was immediate—strong and steady.

The dome formed.

Runes wrote themselves swiftly.

Four circles.

Two in the core and one each in the heart and mind.

They were dense, stable, and strong.

His vitality reading was significantly above average—a reflection of his monstrous physical strength for his age. His mana capacity, though not extraordinary, was solid and well-structured.

Affinity: Fire.

It flared a deep, crimson-gold.

The crowd responded with cheers.

The hunters nodded approvingly, noting him as their own already.

Fire affinity paired with that physical foundation? A true gem, they thought.

His father's booming laughter echoed across the square as he clapped loudly, nearly knocking another man off balance.

"That's my son!"

Gillard stepped down with his usual stoic composure, though the faint upward tilt at the corner of his mouth betrayed his satisfaction.

Teclos caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up.

Gillard returned it with a subtle nod.

After a few more youths, Ralph was called.

He approached light-footed, but no less confident than Gillard.

He pressed his palm against the stone and let his mana flow.

The dome expanded.

Four circles as well—one core, two heart, one mind.

They were balanced and stable circles.

His mana capacity was higher than Gillard's, and his overall percentages were impressively even across the board besides agility, which was high.

Affinity: Wind.

It shimmered in a pale silver light, stable and refined.

A murmur of impressed approval and cheers followed again, just like with Gillard. Wind hunters were adaptable. Tactical assets, and quick.

Ralph's family cheered with bright smiles, their pride was unmistakable.

When he stepped down, Teclos met him with a grin.

"Not bad."

Ralph smiled and said with a thumbs up. "Show them that there is a step above."

The parchment in Brahm's hand rustled as he turned another page.

Several more youths followed.

The crowd's reactions rose and fell like tides—pleased sighs, restrained applause, the occasional disappointed silence. The only noteworthy one was Loric, with much the same results as Ralph and Gillard.

Then—

Brahm's voice echoed again.

"Teclos."

It was a simple call.

But to Teclos, it struck like a drumbeat.

For a split second, his back stiffened.

An old reflex.

Like being called to the chalkboard in school or being called into a performance check meeting at work.

Every gaze suddenly shifted to him.

He exhaled slowly and stepped forward.

The nervousness tried to claw up his throat, but he crushed it down. Up until that point, he had already endured discriminating gazes, harsh training, and even a life-and-death situation.

This was nothing compared to those times.

The platform creaked faintly under his boots as he approached.

He looked at the hand-shaped carving, placed his palm against it, and pushed his mana forward.

The response was instantaneous.

The red runes did not just flicker.

They ignited.

Brighter than anyone else before.

The hum from the pedestal deepened, resonating like a struck bell.

The dome erupted outward in a clean, smooth expansion—it was more defined.

White mist swirled densely across its surface.

Then the runes began to write on the dome's surface.

Overall vitality—

High.

His mana capacity—

The symbols shifted, recalculated, and brightened.

Gasps and disbelief stirred among the hunters first.

He was already at a novice hunter level.

At this age.

The next shock didn't take long to hit the crowd.

Mana circles.

The first rune appeared and showed two circles in the core. After that was the heart—again two circles.

The murmur grew as the crowd saw that it wasn't finished yet.

Lastly was the mind, with one circle shining.

Stunned silence followed.

Five circles—and to top it all off, they were stable and strong.

Each of the circles displayed unusual strength and powerful flow, usually present at higher levels. Like they were supporting each other.

Even the elders were stunned now.

Finally, for affinity—

The line began to carve itself into the mist.

The color manifested slowly—and instead of shining brightly—

It swallowed light.

Like a deep, intense onyx color—ready to swallow the world whole.

It was the Darkness affinity.

The dome of mist held firm, for everyone to see.

The square went utterly silent.

Hunters stared at him, assessing his worth that had just shifted the scale of their expectations.

Townfolk looked at him, stunned, as if trying to understand what they were seeing.

A monster, some thought.

A genius, others believed.

Even Brahm's expression—composed as ever—had stilled. The faintest tightening around his eyes betrayed the calculation of Teclos's worth in his mind, and how to refine this rough gem for the benefit of the town.

This many circles at fourteen.

Three more than some who stood beside him on that podium.

Even one extra circle created a gap that could take years to close.

Three?

That was not a gap, but a deep chasm.

Talmir's chest swelled as if he might burst from the pride radiating off him without restraint.

Father Pella also beamed openly, a smile spreading across his face.

Saldia—

She was a crying wreck.

Hands pressed to her mouth, tears slipping freely down her cheeks like a waterfall, her smile trembling with emotions she could not contain.

Their son would finally be acknowledged, they thought.

Among the youths, the reactions were quieter.

Some were awed.

Some felt envy.

And others were frustrated, simply staring and feeling the unfairness of life settle heavily in their stomachs.

Then the dome finally dimmed, and the mist dissolved.

The red runes on the stone faded back to their resting glow.

Teclos withdrew his hand slowly, almost regretfully.

The square remained silent for one long heartbeat more.

Then sound returned all at once—murmurs, whispers, disbelieving exhalations, and a few over-the-top cheers.

He stepped down from the platform.

He stood proudly.

As if to declare, here I am. And you shall witness me.

Chapter 49 - 48 - Achievement Unlocked: Adulthood

The square slowly emptied of its earlier noise, townsfolk dispersing in clusters of animated discussion while the youths were directed toward the Guild Hall for the last time.

The celebratory atmosphere among the youths shifted into something more mixed—nervous, excited, anxious, restless, and quietly hopeful.

Teclos walked with the others toward the massive stone structure dominating the center of Kolma. Now that the formal display was over, the next step awaited them: counseling from the elders.

The elders would offer guidance, suggest paths they could take, and open doors with their recommendations.

Teclos inhaled once, steadying himself, then followed the attendant who called his name after a while of waiting in the lobby.

They led him past the main hall and toward one of the larger inner chambers—usually reserved for strategy gatherings. It was where they had done the written test, though today it had been arranged differently.

At the far end of the room, a long oak table was placed, and behind it sat the ten elders of Kolma.

Ten figures who governed trade, law, guild matters, agriculture, defense, and diplomacy.

Before them, a single wooden chair was positioned, facing them directly.

Teclos stepped inside.

As he reached the chair, he did not sit down immediately, but instead bowed.

Deep enough to show them the respect they deserved.

"I greet the elders," he said evenly.

A few of them nodded almost at once.

One elder with long silver hair inclined her head approvingly.

Another stroked his beard thoughtfully.

Only then did Teclos take his seat.

He met their gazes, anticipating what path he would be recommended.

In the center of the table sat Elder Ezekiel.

He was neither the oldest nor the most physically imposing, yet authority seemed to gather naturally around him. His posture was relaxed but deliberate, fingers interlaced before him, eyes sharp beneath bushy brows.

When he spoke, his voice carried weight.

"Teclos," he began warmly, "first, allow me to say—well done."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"There is no need to be nervous. With your results, you have many paths open to you."

The words eased some invisible tension in Teclos.

Ezekiel lifted a parchment.

"Now then, let us review."

He adjusted it slightly.

"Your written examination."

His eyes flicked up briefly before continuing.

"Not full marks—but close. An excellent score overall."

Teclos listened quietly.

"Your knowledge of monsters and herbal studies was flawless. Detailed and neatly structured. Above the level expected for your age."

A few elders murmured approval at that.

"In the sections regarding noble hierarchies, territorial rulership, and kingdom politics, your answers were... somewhat less thorough."

A faint ripple of restrained amusement passed along the table.

"Still good," Ezekiel clarified. "But clearly not your area of focus."

Teclos resisted the urge to shrug.

"Mathematics and trading calculations—accurate and efficient. You would have no difficulty managing resources or running independent operations if you chose such a path."

He placed that parchment aside and lifted another.

"On to the physical examinations."

Now the tone shifted slightly.

"Simply outstanding." A slight pause before he continued.

"In every discipline, you placed within the top three—be it running, archery, striking, climbing, or endurance."

One elder leaned forward.

"Your adaptability under stress is particularly notable."

Another nodded.

"You conserve energy intelligently. It was like we were watching an already seasoned hunter."

Then Ezekiel continued.

"To perform consistently across all categories—not merely one specialty—demonstrates not only talent, but the discipline and sheer effort you have put in."

Teclos remained still.

But inside, he beamed with glee. They had recognized him.

Then Ezekiel shook his head with a smile on his face, as if he couldn't believe it.

"And finally..."

He lifted the final document.

"Your rune stone results... At your age, even accounting for natural aptitude, this is remarkable."

He looked directly at Teclos now.

"Genius is a word thrown around carelessly. In your case, I would say it is appropriate."

A pause.

"As for your affinity... Darkness."

A few elders shifted subtly as the word hung between them.

"You are likely aware," Ezekiel continued calmly, "that this affinity is most commonly associated with undead manifestations, certain abyssal creatures, and... less reputable practitioners of mana."

Teclos nodded.

Ezekiel's gaze sharpened slightly.

"You should not worry," he reassured him. "Here in Kolma, we don't judge based on that superstition."

Another elder added, voice firm, "That's right, we judge by conduct and action."

Ezekiel nodded once, then leaned back slightly.

A faint smile returned to his face.

"It would be a welcome power here on the frontier, where many dangers are lurking around the corner."

The weight of those words settled deeper than baseless praise.

It was acceptance, trust, and expectation from the elders.

Ezekiel folded his hands again.

"You stand at the beginning of adulthood, Teclos. Hunter. Scholar. Merchant. Strategist. Even leadership, in time."

His eyes softened—but only slightly.

"The question now is not what you can become." A pause. "It is what you choose to become."

Ezekiel's final words lingered in the chamber.

Then Ezekiel reached for another parchment, thicker than the others. He adjusted it on the table and began to read.

"Based on your performance across written, physical, and mana evaluations," he said evenly, "we have assessed several viable paths."

His gaze skimmed the page.

"You possess the discipline required for structured professions. Your knowledge of herbs and monster anatomy qualifies you, even now, to apprentice formally under Kolma's herbalist and eventually succeed the position."

A gray-haired elder to Ezekiel's right added, "A town herbalist with combat capability is... rare. Valuable for gathering herbs deeper in the forest."

Ezekiel inclined his head slightly and continued.

"Your strategic thinking and temperament during physical trials suggest aptitude for leadership. Squad command within the hunter ranks would not be unrealistic within several years."

Another parchment shifted.

"Hunter, of course, is firmly on the short list."

There was the faintest hint of amusement in Ezekiel's tone as Teclos twitched.

"That much seems obvious."

A few elders allowed themselves restrained smiles.

"If you wished to spread your wings beyond Kolma," Ezekiel went on, "your rune stone results would make you eligible to apply to the Royal Academy in the capital."

The word capital seemed to change the air slightly.

"Advanced mana theory. Formalized combat instruction. Political exposure. Connections that extend beyond provincial towns."

He let that sit before continuing.

"You could pursue trade as well. Your mathematical competency and self-control would allow you to succeed."

A brief pause.

"However," Ezekiel said frankly, "we would consider that a waste of your particular talents."

There was no arrogance in the statement. Only assessment.

Leadership, defense, influence. The options for his future had built up before he knew it.

Ezekiel finished reading and placed the parchment down.

"Do you have any questions, Teclos?"

The invitation was genuine.

And Teclos inhaled slowly.

"I am fairly certain," he began carefully, "that I wish to become a hunter here in Kolma."

Several elders nodded immediately. That answer surprised no one.

"But," he continued, "there is something I would like to understand."

Ezekiel gestured for him to go on.

"If I wanted to train under a knight—formally, as one does—could I do so and later return here?"

A few elders exchanged glances.

Teclos pressed on.

"I want to see more of the world. Experience different styles of food. Different lands. But someday... I would return. Kolma is my home, after all."

He held their gaze openly.

"I do not wish to abandon it."

The room grew thoughtful.

Finally, Ezekiel answered.

"It is possible to hire a knight privately for instruction," he said. "Such arrangements can be negotiated—temporary and contract-based."

The long silver-haired elder added, "Though it would be expensive."

Ezekiel gave the faintest smile.

"However," he continued, "if you formally join a knightly order... that is another matter."

His expression turned more serious.

"Knight orders operate under oath and noble authority. Once sworn, your service belongs to the house or order you bind yourself to."

"Leaving," another elder said plainly, "is therefore rarely permitted—unless you are released."

"And releases," Ezekiel added, "are not usually granted unless the house falls or you break the code and are either executed or exiled."

Teclos nodded slowly and absorbed the information.

"There is also Ulmak," Teclos said. "I heard he was once in a knight order."

A few brows lifted.

"Yes," Ezekiel confirmed. "That is true."

"He served under a minor noble house several years ago."

"What happened?" Teclos asked.

The elders exchanged another look.

"The house fell," Ezekiel answered simply. "Political miscalculation. Debt. Land disputes. Who is to say? All I know is that they were mostly stripped of their belongings."

"With their fall," another elder explained, "their retainers were dismissed. Contracts dissolved. Ulmak returned here afterward."

"So it is possible," Teclos said quietly.

"It is possible," Ezekiel agreed. "But not something to rely upon."

The implication was clear.

Ulmak had not left by choice.

He had been released because the house collapsed.

Ezekiel leaned forward slightly.

"If your desire is to experience broader horizons without permanently binding yourself, we would advise caution regarding formal knightly oaths."

He studied Teclos.

"There are other ways to see the world anyway," a long-haired elder said.

"Mercenaries," another elder suggested. "They travel between different territories, doing bounties or protecting caravans."

"Temporary assignments in neighboring regions are an option too," Ezekiel continued. "Guild exchanges, if you will."

Silence settled again—Teclos considered everything carefully.

A hunter.

A mercenary.

Enroll into the academy.

A knight.

An adventurer.

He had many options. For now, he would stay a hunter, but later? A mercenary sounded good, perhaps...

"Thank you," he said sincerely, bowing his head once more.

When the counseling finally concluded, Teclos stepped out of the guild hall into the afternoon light.

His parents were waiting near the entrance, along with Father Pella. Saldia stood with her hands folded in front of her; with bright eyes, she saw him the moment he emerged. Talmir leaned against the stone wall with a forced casualness that fooled no one.

Father Pella shook his head at Talmir, then smiled leisurely at Teclos. His robes were immaculate despite the long day.

They were all curious.

"Well?" Saldia asked immediately, stepping forward.

Teclos allowed himself a small smile. "It went well."

Talmir pushed off the wall. "Of course it did."

Teclos briefly recounted the discussion—the praise for his written and physical tests, the emphasis on his circles, the mention of the Academy, leadership roles, traveling, and so on.

"And what's your plan?" Talmir asked, more serious now.

Teclos nodded. "For now, I will stay in the town and aim to be a hunter. Later on, I might try to be a mercenary, and I am not sure about being a knight—the oath would limit me heavily."

Father Pella stroked his beard thoughtfully. "That is the nature of oaths."

Saldia reached up and cupped Teclos's cheek for a brief moment. She kissed him on the forehead and said, "You handled yourself well."

"I asked questions and didn't just nod along," he replied. "So yes, I think so too."

Father Pella's eyes sparkled with... greed? Teclos blinked in confusion. 'Huh?'

Talmir gave a firm nod. "That's my boy."

Teclos smiled, pleased by the praise.

After that, Saldia's expression softened visibly. Talmir's shoulders relaxed, just slightly.

"We never wished to chain you here," Saldia said quietly. "But... knowing you wish to stay of your own will—"

"It means a lot to us," Talmir finished.

"It's my home," Teclos said simply.

Father Pella studied him for a long moment, then said casually, "You know, boy, if—and I mean if—the mercenary or knight route proves too complicated for you... there is always the Dawn Order and the paladins."

Teclos blinked. 'Oh, so I didn't see wrong.'

"The paladins?" he asked knowingly.

Pella inclined his head. "Their martial discipline is formidable. Their training rivals knight orders—surpasses them, even."

Teclos hesitated only a second before voicing what had already formed in his mind.

"With my affinity?"

Silence.

"Darkness," he said plainly. "Undead share it. The Church doesn't exactly... favor that."

Father Pella did not immediately respond. He just nodded.

"In truth," he admitted, "you are correct. The current Dawn Church is not what it once was."

His voice lowered slightly.

"There is corruption within its ranks. Politics running rampant. Image more important than honor or duty."

Talmir crossed his arms. "Meaning they'd look at him sideways."

"Some would," Pella admitted. "Others would see potential. But prejudice exists everywhere," he added.

Teclos shook his head lightly. "I can't trust them... sorry, Father Pella."

A faint chuckle escaped Talmir, amused by the old man being rejected.

"Good instincts."

Pella offered a rueful smile. "Wisdom sometimes lies in knowing where not to go."

The conversation ended there.

One by one, the remaining youths exited the guild hall after their counseling sessions. Faces ranged from excited to overwhelmed to uncertain.

When the final door closed, Brahm stepped forward once more and called the youths toward the platform erected in the town square.

The murmuring crowd quieted down.

Elira stood beside him, holding a neat stack of parchment sheets bound with a ribbon and sealed with wax bearing the guild crest.

Brahm commanded attention as he spoke.

"You have all completed your coming-of-age evaluations," he announced. "We will now begin the formal recognition."

Each youth would be called forward and presented with a parchment—an official record of their achievements, proof of their identity, and a declaration of their passage into adulthood.

His gaze swept across the assembled youths, and one by one, he began calling their names.

Each youth climbed the platform, received a firm handshake, and was handed their official certification.

Families applauded. Some shouted. Some wept openly.

When Gillard's name was called, his father's booming laugh echoed across the square as the burly man clapped hard enough to startle those nearby.

When Ralph stepped forward, his family whistled loudly, embarrassing him to no end.

Lastly—

"Teclos."

He ascended the platform without hesitation.

The applause began almost immediately—louder than before, swelling outward like a ripple across water. He saw Saldia wiping at her eyes. Talmir stood tall, clapping loudly and proudly. Father Pella offered a subtle nod of acknowledgment.

Brahm extended his hand.

Their handshake was solid—congratulatory.

"Well done," Brahm said quietly enough that only Teclos could hear.

Teclos met his gaze. "Thank you."

Elira stepped forward and handed him the parchment.

The seal was warm from the sun. The wax bore Kolma's crest clearly stamped.

As he held it, a strange feeling washed over him.

Nostalgia.

It felt absurdly similar to finishing school in another life—receiving a diploma, a marker that one Chapter had ended and another had begun.

The applause continued for a few more seconds before slowly fading as he stepped down from the platform.

Saldia embraced him immediately,

while Talmir gripped his shoulder firmly.

"You're an adult now," his father said.

Chapter 50 - 49 - Starting a New - in Life

Winter had settled over Kolma like a soft white cloak.

Snow rested thick upon the rooftops, curling along chimney edges and clinging to the wooden beams of homes that had weathered generations. Smoke rose lazily into the pale dawn sky, thin columns twisting in the frigid air.

The town was quiet—half-asleep beneath the hush of winter—only the distant crackle of hearth fires and the faint creak of frost-covered shutters breaking the silence.

The sun had just begun to rise.

Golden light spilled over the eastern hills, catching on the frozen branches of apple trees and making them glitter as though dusted in crushed diamonds. Footprints from the early bakers and farmers had already marked the snow in uneven patterns, but most doors remained closed.

Except one door suddenly burst open.

"Bye, Mom! Wish me luck!"

The shout cut cleanly through the cold morning air.

Teclos barely waited for a reply before rushing down the wooden steps of his home. The door closed behind him with a thud as he tightened his scarf around his neck and adjusted the leather straps across his chest.

His boots hit the snow.

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Each hurried step carved deep impressions into the untouched path as he ran, his breath puffing visibly before him in quick white bursts of mist.

Half a year had passed.

Half a year since the coming-of-age ceremony.

He was fifteen years old now and on his way to his new future.

Today—finally—was the most anticipated hunter examination, which was held only once a year.

His heartbeat was faster than his running pace.

He cut through the main road, passing shuttered stalls and frost-covered signboards. A few townsfolk glanced at him from windows, recognizing the familiar determined sprint. Somewhere, a dog barked once as if greeting him.

As he turned the final corner, the guild hall came into view.

Its heavy wooden doors were framed in frost, the guild crest carved proudly above the entrance. Lanterns still burned faintly beside it, though daylight was steadily overtaking them.

And there they were.

Ralph and Gillard stood at the base of the steps, bundled in winter coats, arms crossed against the cold.

Ralph spotted him first.

"Do you have to be late every damn time?" he called out.

Gillard exhaled slowly, shaking his head. "We almost went ahead without you, man."

Teclos slowed to a jog, flashing them a grin as he approached.

"I know, I know. Sorry, guys." He adjusted his scarf theatrically. "But the main character is always fashionably late."

Ralph stared at him flatly.

"Fashionably late?" he repeated. "What kind of clown crowned you the protagonist?"

Gillard snorted, trying—and failing—to suppress a laugh.

Teclos shrugged. "Self-appointed. Very prestigious title."

Ralph muttered something about delusions as the three of them climbed the steps together, boots thudding against frozen wood.

They entered the guild hall mid-bicker, the warm air inside hitting their faces like a comforting wall. The scent of parchment, ink, and faintly burning oil lamps replaced the sharp and fresh air of winter.

The hall was already partially filled.

Several familiar faces stood near the reception counter—"new" adults like themselves.

Loric was there, arms folded, posture rigid as ever. Beside him stood one of his usual companions, equally sour-faced. Eldric leaned casually against a pillar, speaking quietly with Samara, who looked more bored than nervous.

All in all—ten applicants, it seemed.

Ten besides the three of them.

Thirteen youths seeking to become hunters.

The reactions upon noticing Teclos, Ralph, and Gillard were mixed.

Loric's expression soured instantly, lips pressing thin.

His friend mirrored the disdain.

Others spared only brief glances before returning their attention to whatever they were doing previously. The pressure of today overrode most of the petty rivalries.

This was not the usual training ground competition.

This was the gate to a new, prestigious life in Kolma.

As the trio approached the reception counter, the guild receptionist—a middle-aged woman with sharp features and light brown hair—looked up.

"Teclos, Ralph, and Gillard," Ralph announced their names.

Without further ceremony, she pulled three parchments from a stack and slid them across the polished wood.

"Read and sign."

Teclos picked his up.

The parchment was thick and had an official feel to it. He thought it smelled of a new and glorious life waiting for him... and ink.

It detailed the conditions of the hunter examination:

- Applicants must obey all instructor commands during testing.

- Injury sustained during examination absolves guild hunters of liability.

- Exception: liability applies if injury results from direct misconduct or faulty instruction by supervising hunters.

- Applicants acknowledge risk of physical harm.

Teclos' eyes narrowed slightly as he read more carefully.

The wording was old-fashioned.

Broad in some areas.

Vague in others.

There were... gaps.

Liability clauses dependent on proving misconduct. Definitions left open to interpretation. Responsibility loosely structured.

He could already see potential loopholes... not that he intended to exploit them, of course... but they were there.

Ralph leaned closer. "You reading it like it's a royal decree?"

"Just appreciating the craftsmanship," Teclos murmured.

Gillard skimmed his quickly and signed without hesitation.

Ralph followed, scrawling his name boldly.

Teclos hesitated only a second longer before signing as well.

He placed the quill down carefully.

The receptionist collected the parchments and stacked them neatly.

"You will be briefed shortly," she said. "Wait here near the center."

The thirteen applicants moved inward, forming a loose cluster.

The guild hall felt different today for most of the staff and the hunters.

This wasn't merely a warm welcome to the rookies.

But they would finally get a much needed help. New hunters for the guild—new comrades, new staff, and helping hands.

The waiting did not last long.

From the upper offices at the rear of the guild hall, heavy boots thudded against the stairs. Four figures descended together, their presence immediately shifting the atmosphere of the room.

They represented what would be the youths' future selves.

Their gait showed experience from life-and-death situations and discipline.

The first voice to break the silence belonged to Darnel.

"God damn! Why do I have to babysit them?" he barked, scratching at the back of his neck. "I could've stayed home today!"

Immediately dispelling any magic the trainees felt at the start.

Sera, walking beside him, didn't even glance his way at first.

"Relax, you small-brained baby," she replied coolly. "Throwing tantrums around isn't going to get you anywhere with the master."

Darnel stopped mid-step.

"What did you say, you cow-tits bimbo?"

The air suddenly felt very hot around them.

Teclos felt it immediately—the pressure... scorching hot mana.

Sera's mana flared outward—hot, sharp, aggressive. The warmth in the guild hall spiked unnaturally, like standing too close to a furnace in the smithy.

Darnel didn't back down, though.

Instead, his own aura erupted in response. Cold moisture gathered in the air, faint droplets forming and freezing at the edges of nearby tables.

The temperature warred between heat and cold.

The trainees stiffened.

Even Ralph's grin vanished.

Ulmak stepped between them with an exhausted sigh.

"Relax already," he said. "You can fight it out outside. Besides, you're scaring the kids."

Darnel snorted.

"If they get scared by this much, they ain't fit for hunting."

Sera shot him one more glare—slowly judging him, and dangerous—before retracting her mana. The heat dissipated.

But her expression did not soften—quite the opposite, it turned sinister. There was no doubt she was thinking of revenge.

Teclos noticed Ulmak notice it too.

Ulmak merely thought, '*Good luck, Darnel,*' and walked forward.

The four hunters stopped before the applicants.

Ulmak stepped ahead of the others.

"Welcome to the hunter exam," he began calmly. "First, I would like to introduce your instructors for today."

He gestured to himself.

"I am Ulmak. A fire mage. I've completed multiple hunting expeditions, leading some, and I was in charge of the hunters during the Ragla incident three or four years ago."

A few trainees glanced at Teclos.

Then he motioned toward Sera.

"This is Sera. Also a fire mage. She is a close combat specialist. Her flaming sword has sliced through many monsters and will likely do so to many more."

Sera gave a lazy wave, though her eyes remained sharp.

Ulmak gestured toward Darnel.

"Our big bundle of personality, Darnel. A very skilled water mage—his mid-range utility is outstanding."

Darnel crossed his arms.

"A goddamn babysitter, tch..." he muttered.

"And last but not least," Ulmak continued, nodding toward the broad-shouldered man at the end, "Kosak. An excellent earth mage. If you need scouting or something needs to not move, he's your man."

Kosak simply nodded.

Just a steady presence.

"Now that introductions are finished, follow us," Ulmak ordered.

They were led to the changing rooms.

Inside, racks of trainee gear were neatly arranged. Standard issue.

Each applicant received:

A bow.

A quiver of normal arrows.

A short sword.

Basic leather armor.

Sturdy boots.

A leather cap.

Some had their own pieces of gear, and Loric even seemed to be fully equipped already.

Teclos ran a hand along the bow's curve.

It was a simple short bow. Functional and adequate.

As they began equipping themselves, Ulmak continued speaking.

"If you pass the exam—which, by the way, is simply a hunt—you may keep the trainee set until you've earned enough to purchase your own gear."

He paced slowly as they tightened straps and tested grips.

"Today's hunt will be done in a group. In each group, one hunter will be assigned to you as a mentor. The assigned hunter will provide basic guidance and instructions for you."

He paused.

"Outside of that, we will not help you unless absolutely necessary."

A few trainees swallowed.

"If it comes to that," Ulmak added evenly, "you should consider yourselves disqualified. Well, most of the time."

Darnel groaned loudly.

"Holy shit, how much is he gonna ramble on? I have places to be."

Kosak didn't even look at him.

"Shut up," he said flatly. "He needs to explain this for their safety."

"Who gives a shit?" Darnel shot back. "He can explain it when he's alone with them."

Sera scoffed.

"The only place you need to be is at the pub, drinking again like a loser," she said in a sickly sweet voice. "But man, today you really are an insufferable prick."

Darnel's aura flared again—cold, sharp, and aggressive.

Only this time, Ulmak did not sigh.

He exploded.

Mana flooded the room like a collapsing mountain.

The trainees dropped.

Literally.

Teclos felt his knees buckle as the weight of the mana pressed against his shoulders. His breath hitched. Even thinking became difficult under the sheer density of Ulmak's sudden aura release.

Darnel's flare vanished instantly, silenced.

"Listen," Ulmak spoke, his voice no longer calm, but still controlled. "I don't care that you're in a bad mood. You are interrupting information they need. Some of it is vital for their well-being."

The pressure intensified slightly.

"Now silence until I say otherwise. From all of you..."

Sera stood very still.

Kosak remained unbothered.

Darnel glared—but said nothing.

Teclos stared. This was the first time he had seen Ulmak truly angry, and it was terrifying.

Just as suddenly as it appeared, the aura vanished.

The air felt light again.

Ulmak cleared his throat.

"Now that the nagging has stopped," he said casually, "let's continue with my lecture. Oh—and kids—you can still ask questions. No need to be afraid."

A few nervous chuckles broke the tension.

Once fully geared, they exited the guild hall and stepped back into the winter morning.

The cold felt refreshing after the tense situation.

At the town gates, the hunters divided the trainees into four groups.

Teclos looked over the groups quickly.

Loric ended up in Sera's group, and Ralph ended up in Kosak's.

Interesting.

Darnel took four others, including one of Loric's friends.

Kosak formed another trio.

Ulmak looked at the remaining names.

"Teclos. Samara. Eldric. Gillard. You're with me."

Teclos felt a small surge of excitement as it was finally about to begin.

They headed toward the northern path.

Toward the mountains.

Snow crunched beneath their boots as they walked. Their breath fogged in the air.

Ulmak led them steadily across the terrain without stopping.

"You have only one objective," he said as they moved. "You are to track, locate, and kill a suitable low-rank monster. Preferably something you can handle alone, without me."

"Now, any suggestions?" Ulmak asked.

"A pack of wolves?" Eldric asked, unsure.

"Sure, that works... if you want to die. Stone boars and dire wolves are generally a hard hunt. Horned hares are easy, but you'll need many to pass. Lone dire wolves, if you can find them," Ulmak replied. "Avoid anything that moves in packs..."

They approached the river.

The water flowed dark beneath partial sheets of ice. Kosak's group veered west before the crossing. Darnel's group had already disappeared south.

Ulmak stopped.

"Cross carefully," he instructed.

Samara spotted stones beneath the surface and began planning a stepping route.

Teclos watched the terrain.

The mountains loomed ahead, white and silent.

He focused now... this was it, a real hunt.

Ulmak glanced back at them.

"From here on out," he said quietly, "act like hunters."